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stories

MARCH 1969
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MAGAZINE

NEW

- **JOHN SLADEK** • The Aggressor
- **THOMAS DISCH** • The Invasion
of the Giant Stupid Dinosaurs
- **DAVID BUNCH** • In the Time of
Disposal of Infants
- **DURANT IMBODEN** • Prelude
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Amazing

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FEARLESS YOU

Editorial by LAURENCE M. JANIFER

It strikes me (and, your editor having been generous enough to make me a Guest, it must hereupon strike you) that there has been a great deal of talk in sf circles about the daring of its writers, the fearless lack of limitations among editors and here and there a publisher, the general breathtaking scope and lack of prejudice in the field.

With all due respect to Harlan Ellison (and I'm afraid there isn't much; but if we were all to get our due, as Hamlet observes, the flagellants would be working overtime), this has got to stop.

Since I began reading sf, and somewhat later actually writing the stuff and getting it published, I have noticed a few immense areas of fear, limitation, prejudice and simple blight. There are to be three of them, and since all three are important to me as a human being and/or a writer, I would like to consider them a little.

1. *Sex*. Sex, in science-fiction much before 1952, simply did not exist in any recognizable form. The Kinisons got married and had children, but to someone who had read nothing but sf the motives involved, let alone the causal structure, would have been incomprehensible. Why multiply examples? except to notice once again the very real shock with which Philip Jose Farmer's *THE LOVERS* (rather mild, actually) hit the pulp stands.

"We've changed all that," and indeed we have. As usual with large-

area change, we have over-reacted. It may be time to realize that a brand-new sex, or a set of three hitherto unimagined perversions dished up smoking hot from the same typewriter which sometimes dishes up a set of three hitherto unimagined time-travel notions, has about the same effect in sf that it has in other literature. It sells many, many copies. Because it is as strong (read: as salable) as it is, it is extraordinarily difficult to handle. Among the many, many copies, then, the percentage of bad, mishandled, disproportioned books is going to be even higher than it usually is; which has happened.

2. *Style*. Despite C. L. Moore and others, the average sf editor appeared to blench at anything more than a simple declarative sentence. (And a good many of us got away with less than that; the number of paragraphs consisting entirely of: "And then . . ." is incalculable.) Most sf was so badly written, for so many years, that a cult like that of the Western story nearly formed on the familiar horrible style, just because it *was* familiar.

Again, it's all been changed. We live in the light of a brand-new day, and we are positively surrounded by style.

The writing isn't any better. But my God, it's *fancier*. There were capable writers away back when (Williamson, Eric Frank Russell, Moore, Kuttner . . . and too many

to list; this is how feuds start), and there are capable writers now (fill in this space with your favorite names and watch some more feuds start). But we have not been liberated; we still ride the pendulum; over-reaction has handed us teetering piles of stories which consist entirely of style; which is rather like a meal entirely made up of whipped cream, in various molds.

3. *Humor.*

May I repeat that? *Humor.*

Here, matters have not changed at all. How extraordinarily difficult it is to get sf humor published in book form (the magazines are generally more hospitable, but their appetites are smaller by nature) I cannot convey. There is a legend going round that people will not buy funny sf. This legend greeted me when I first walked into the field, and it was like walking into an unexpected wet fish smack across the chops. The fish, miraculously preserved, is still part of our stream.

Here is a secret: book publishers don't listen to fans. A great many people who buy sf books do not read the magazines, and are not, in the usual sense, fans. The publisher's legend appears to be built on those—the faceless Market which no one ever sees, but which creeps out to put down its pennies on this or that Carefully Managed Product.

Writing letters to publishers, then, is not going to do any good. And I really don't know what would. Unlike sex and style, two commodities always more available outside sf than inside it, humor is frowned on almost everywhere in this land of ours, where the buffalo roam

and the sky is only a little cloudier than expected.

Respect goes to the man who can wrap up a lumpy truth and make you feel that even the wrapping is solemnly important. The humorist, the clown, the comedian . . . perhaps the fact that neither Benchley nor Thurber ever got a Pulitzer Prize says as much about comparative status as can be said.

It is obviously easier to write a large solemn book than it is to write a small simple joke. A piece of flaming rhetoric, full of symbols and referents and so forth, is wonderful if it comes off; and if it doesn't quite come off it is still pretty good. But a joke that doesn't quite come off needs burial, and as rapid burial as can be arranged.

(G. K. Chesterton noticed that in print some years ago. If you're so unlucky that you haven't managed to memorize most of GKC, I may, undeservedly, be the first conveyor of this oddity for you; it remains, of course, quite true. And it always will.)

Anypracticedcomediancanmakea pretty fair showing in a non-comedic area within his own work definitions (Thurber wrote ONE IS A WANDERER; Bert Lahr made a personal triumph out of WAITING FOR GO DOT). When this happens, people seem to be surprised. I don't know why. Comedy, after all, can be defined in part as that area of art in which nothing less than perfection is acceptable.

Americans do have a general feeling that if you like something it isn't good for you. But we—we fearless, daring sf readers and writers and

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THE INVASION OF THE GIANT STUPID DINOSAURS

THOMAS M. DISCH

Illustrated by BRUCE JONES

Thomas M. Disch has appeared in countless magazines ranging from PLAYBOY and MADE-MOISELLE through ESCAPADE and ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S, and Doubleday will shortly publish (or has already published by the time this sees print) a literary novel, CAMP CONCENTRATION which is, as the boys say, something else again. But Tom Disch's first sales—many of them—were made to Cele Goldsmith's AMAZING and FANTASTIC. Disch, I think, is the best writer to come from this category since Hugo Gernsback in a fit of picque thought up the whole thing decades ago, and someday all of us are going to be very glad to claim him. This story gives some indication why.



BRUCE ELLIOT JONES

Dear Sir,

As is well known, the sudden appearance last week of the so-called 'Martian dinosaurs' is still a subject of considerable interest and speculation in newspapers and on television. Undoubtedly this problem is being dealt with now by persons far more able and qualified than myself, but I feel it is my responsibility as a citizen of this country to offer you the benefit, such as it may be, of my experience in this matter. If nothing else, my report may serve to correct some of the more exaggerated accounts that have appeared in the Press.

My wife and I were acquaintances of many years' standing with the unfortunate Reverend Revelstorke, and on the night of this remarkable occurrence we had the good fortune to be in the company of that distinguished gentleman. Our conversation had naturally focused on the topic that then occupied everyone—the strange disturbances on the face of the planet Mars and the almost simultaneous appearance in our own night skies of new luminescences. Reverend Revelstorke concurred in the popular opinion that these luminescences were something in the nature of 'flying saucers,' but he did not view their advent with the alarm then generally being expressed. Rather, he regarded this as (I quote his own words): "A wonderful opportunity for mankind, an invitation to the Universal Brotherhood." For my own part I regarded this gentle soul's opinion in this matter (as in many others) as unwarrantedly optimistic, but I saw no reason to dishearten

him by stating my own theories (which events were so eloquently to confirm).

Despite an unseasonable chill we would frequently step out onto the Reverend's well-tended front lawn to witness the lovely, ever-changing configurations of the 'flying saucers,' so much brighter this evening than they had ever been before. Reverend Revelstorke's house was situated at the very periphery of our town and faced, across the highway, an empty field that is the property of our church and serves our Junior League as a temporary sports ground until such time as we are able to find a suitable investor. That these 'space ships' (as they are universally spoken of!) should have settled upon *just this field* as the site of their first 'landing' strikes me as a highly significant fact in view of all that followed.

The first indication that events were to take a sudden new turning was a sound (at first distant but soon deafeningly loud, utterly drowning out the noises of the cars that occasionally passed on the highway) and the appearance (at the same instant) of an unusual light just above the steeple of the Congregationalist Church. (Reverend Revelstorke, I should have pointed out earlier, is a Unitarian.) This light moved on a diagonal northwestward, directly toward our sports ground, and we immediately realized that this shrill and uncomfortable sound, so uncharacteristic of our quiet little town, was issuing from whatever object it was that so rapidly approached us. This object, which seemed as yet nothing more than a kind of vast

pink fuzziness about eighty feet high, settled with a roar into the church's vacant field. Reverend Revelstorke immediately leaped to the conclusion that here, little more than a hundred yards away, was one of the very 'flying saucers' which had been causing such a commotion everywhere. I tended, as I usually do, to reserve judgement, though events were to confirm, all too amply, the Reverend's first intuitions.

He immediately returned to his house for a high-powered flashlight that he always kept at hand for emergencies. My wife was at first reluctant to cross the road to investigate this phenomenon closer at hand, but by now three or four cars had stopped along the highway and a small group of curiosity-seekers was gathered at the edge of the field. Believing that there is 'Safety in Numbers' my wife agreed to accompany us at least as far as the wire fence about the field.

This 'landing' took place at approximately 10.25 p.m. and Reverend Revelstorke was killed shortly after eleven o'clock. I neglected to note these times in my vest diary and must therefore rely on my memory (which my wife will tell you is usually very accurate!)

The pink glow about this astonishing object gradually faded and we were able to discern its silhouette. Due to the darkness one could not make out any other features that might have helped to identify it, such as markings, insignia, etc. In shape it resembled the hubcap of a Mercedes automobile, though of course immensely enlarged. Reverend Revelstorke's flashlight revealed

that the grass about the base of this object, dry at this season of the year, had been severely scorched. I pointed this damage out to him with considerable vexation. No doubt the ground *beneath* this object would be discovered to be in an even more devastated condition. (This has since proved to be the case: the field will have to be entirely re-seeded next spring.)

Nearly a dozen people had gathered about the 'flying saucer' by this time and were discussing excitedly the meaning of what had just happened as well as arguing about the best course of action for them to take. It was agreed that the police should be notified at once, and my wife volunteered to telephone for them from the Reverend's house. Thus it was that she was not present to witness Reverend Revelstorke's tragic death.

Scarcely had my wife left us before our attention was drawn to a thin 'line' of light traced upon the surface of the 'flying saucer'. This line described, approximately, three sides of a rectangle. Someone suggested that this resembled the light at the edge of an opening door, though for this to have been the case it would have been necessary that this 'door' be hinged at its base. The line broadened and slowly became a rectangle entire, while the 'door' proved to be a kind of ramp running from the bright opening to the ground.

"They're going to come out here!" Reverend Revelstorke speculated excitedly.

At these words the majority of the onlookers, who had cautiously been approaching the ramp, retreated

once more to the edge of the field. Reverend Revelstorke, however, went boldly to the very foot of the ramp, his arms opened in the traditional gesture of friendship and peace. He had entrusted his flashlight to me so that they would not mistake it for a weapon.

"They must understand that we intend no harm to them," he explained.

At first only the head of the 'dinosaur' emerged from the interior brightness. When I turned the flashlight on it, the beast shied away, bumping itself on the lintel of the door and making a honking sound, like a duck, though quite loud. Reverend Revelstorke flinched but he held his ground. He had already warned us that these aliens might bear very little resemblance to ourselves but that this should not dismay us. No doubt they would feel the same way! He addressed the beast in that voice that had so often won the admiration of his congregation—a simple but clearly enunciated: "Welcome!"

The beast's head advanced toward Reverend Revelstorke supported on the long and sinous stalk of its neck, so that my first impression was that this might be some kind of serpent, or snake. Then, however, I was able to see the immense bulk of its body, so large indeed that it is still a source of wonder to me that it was able to force its way through the opening, large though that was.

I hope that the circumstantiality of this account has made at least one thing clear—that this was neither an optical illusion nor an example of mass hypnosis. Whether the beast that we saw was indeed a 'dinosaur',

and of what kind precisely, I leave to Science to determine. Its dimensions and general features are undoubtedly similar to the illustrations I have seen published in the Press, and likewise its behavior agrees with the more sober accounts I have read. Despite some rumors to the contrary, I have never known it to eat anything but shrubs and leaves during the entire week that it has been in this vicinity. Though doing inestimable damage in this way it has never to my personal knowledge *attacked a single person*, and indeed, except for one brief and ruinous excursion into the center of town, it tends to avoid people whenever possible. But perhaps our 'dinosaur' is an exception to the rule. I speak here only of what I personally have witnessed.

As I have said already, I realize it is not within my competence to engage in the debate concerning the exact physical nature and origin of these 'dinosaurs', nor can I throw any light upon the problem that seems to obsess so many of your readers (namely, how beasts that are apparently so stupid could have devised the means of carrying themselves across the immense distances from planet to planet). By the same token, I will not question the wisdom of the Government's policy to refrain, for the time being, from attacking or restraining these creatures out of fear of the reprisals they may prove capable of. However there is at least one area in which I feel I am as qualified to judge as the next man: that is to say—"What is the *meaning* of this 'Invasion'?"

I maintain that these 'dinosaurs'

Continued on page 86

THE AGGRESSOR

JOHN T. SLADEK

"If I were fortunate enough to edit a science-fiction magazine someday," I said once upon a time, "I would probably just once want to run a really brilliant literary story even if on the face of it the story seemed tangential to the category, could, as a matter of fact, only be seen in relation to that category by a deliberate refusal to see the full range of what the author wanted to say." In due course: a) my rhetoric became less pompous, b) I came to edit a science-fiction magazine and c) the Scott Meredith Literary Agency sent me John Sladek's THE AGGRESSOR which is, along with the Thomas Disch story elsewhere in this issue, the best thing you're going to read in the magazines this year, you bet, I hope.

They say that G. was once a man of great commerce, head in fact of a large computer corporation most of whose factories were aboard ships. These ships sailed constantly, through ocean after ocean, leaving in their wakes bits of printed circuit board and bright scraps of wire. G. and his corporate image were known everywhere; he wanted for nothing, and yet—

Yet, sitting in his comfortable office overlooking the showrooms and guard dogs, G. was not very happy. Happy, yes, but not very. Everything he saw made him so

tired: the array of push-buttons, the towers . . .

One day an engineer came to show him the latest secret processes.

"Look here. This funny material does something to the circuit. See? The electrons just get so far, and then they disappear!"

G. thought about this for a minute. He ordered an automobile built of the funny material. When it was ready, he climbed in and let it carry him off down the turnpike.

After he had driven just so far, he came to a toll gate. The new car rolled to a stop. A man in a peculiar

uniform stepped from the ticket booth and called out to him.

"Glad you could make it, Mr. G."

"But how did you know my name?"

"Well, I guess about everybody knows you, Mr. G. Come on, I'll take you to the Reception Hall."

As they walked, G. examined the stranger's peculiar uniform. If you looked at it out of the corner of your eye, it might be any bright color. Only if you looked directly at it was it plain and brown.

"Wait here, in here," said the man, stopping at the door of the Reception Hall. "The examiners will be ready to see you in a minute."

"The examiners?"

"Oh yeah. Everyone has to take an examination, you know. I'm sorry we can't make an exception for such a V.I.P. as yourself, but you know the saying: Regulations are made to be kept."

G. had to wait in the stuffy hall for hours. He inspected the single tattered magazine in the rack, but it was unreadable. For one thing, every page showed the same picture, with a different headline-caption underneath. The headline-captions were all written in foreign languages, apparently a different language for each page. Supposing they were translations of one another, G. leafed through searching for the English version, but there was none. He read:

SĀNIAG ĀRUOY TUBĀ ESOLĀ
OTĀ GĀNIHTON EVAHĀ ĀUOY!
ETINGIĀ KROWĀ EHĀT FOĀ
SĀREKROW! ELBANIMOBĀ SIĀ
NOITIDOCĀ NAMUHĀ EHĀT!
The picture showed a flame.

HAWO GARK FAER JASO HAFT

THE AGGRESSOR

GAHE JAWO HARK GAIG JANI
HATE!

When he looked closer, he could see something like a shriveled monkey in the middle of the flame.

YIOU HIAVIE NIOTHIINGI TIO
LIOSIE BIUTI YIOURI GIAINISI!

In the background was a curbing. The flame must have been in the middle of some street.

ERO KFOITR GHKEEN IRW TOS!

Very near the flame was a kind of box.

INTABIL UNHABIL UNEABE-
BAL UNHABIL INUABLAL UN-
MABIL UNAABAL INNABEBIL
UNCABIL INOABAL INNABIL
UNDABIL UNIABAL INTABIL
UNIABAL INOABAL INNABE-
BIL UNIABAL INSABEBIL UN-
AABAL UNBABIL INOABAL UN-
MABIL UNIABAL INNABIL UN-
AABAL UNBABIL UNLABIL UN-
EABAL!

The monkey looked in a way human, but small and dark.

HE CUAE IONDTION AN TBOM-
ABLS!

He wondered if his entire, spectacular life had been leading up to this—to die in a waiting room, leafing through an irritating magazine.

TH HMN CNDTN S BMNBL!

Or if this waiting itself were a part of the test.

HET MUNAH NOCDTINOI SI
BONIMAABEL!

Anyway, if this was the kind of thing they were filling their magazines with these days—pictures of a monkey which had somehow escaped from its box and caught fire—he was more than happy to remain a busy and ignorant executive with no time to read!

I BOMB CONDUIT NOISE-NAIL —HAM THEN!

This headline looked almost English, but it made no more sense than the others. What, for instance, was a "noise-nail" supposed to be?

THEROE HEROUMEROAN CER-
OONERODEROITIEROON ISERO
ABERROOMEROINEROABERO-
LEROE!

He threw the magazine down in disgust, just as the four examiners walked into the room.

They introduced themselves as Stone, Brown, White and another whose name G. did not catch. The four looked so much alike, wearing identical drab suits and regimental ties, that G. was never quite sure which one was speaking to him.

"You have three tests to take," one said. "Naturally you may fail the first two, but the third is as we say ultra-important. If you fail that, you've had it. All clear?"

G. nodded. "When do I start?"

"Right away. We'll just take you to the Test Center."

Outside there was just one winding, dusty road leading past the Reception Hall. Not far away stood a series of red signs with white lettering. G. could just make out the first two:

BEARDS GROW QUICKLY
IN THE GRAVE

He hoped to read the rest, but the examiners led him off in the opposite direction.

Now that he had a chance to look at them, G. saw the four were also similar in feature and physique. They were heavy, thick-waisted men, with flat noses and facial scars, and the twisted tissue made them seem to smile ironically, the way an

old boxer smiles as he holds the bucket for a young boxer to spit in. It was with this cynical smile that one of them pointed at a distant spire. "I'm hungry," he said.

They began to climb along a ridge, and G.'s attention was caught by a small lake far below. It was almost covered with what looked like low-flying clouds or enormous suds.

At the sharpest part of the curve, they saw a break in the white guard rail. A vehicle lay on the hillside below them, overturned and in flames. G. stopped for a moment to look, then hurried to catch up with the others.

"Shouldn't we do something?" he asked.

"Too late!" shouted the first examiner, turning a neat handspring.

"Happens all the time!" bellowed the second, flinging himself into a triplet of somersaults.

The third ripped off his belt and began skipping rope without breaking his stride. "They never learn!" he screamed.

"What do they think a guard rail is for, anyway—decoration?" boomed the last, leaping into the air to do a lightning-fast *entrechat*.

While wondering at his companions' lack of compassion, G. was no grumbler; he plodded on. Presently one of them shouted, "There's the Test Center!"

The others grinned at one another, and one of them, nudging G., said, "Isn't the air beautiful?"

It did not seem a question, and G. was too busy looking over the Test Center to try framing an answer.

The Test Center, as far as he could see, looked exactly like the Reception Hall. Its thick, concrete-block

walls were windowless. A single elm obscured most of the large sign painted on one side wall: ". . . E! THIS MEANS YOU!"

As they approached the glass doors, a beggar accosted them. His smile, as he hold out a *fasces* of pencils, was even more scar-twisted and cynical than those of the examiners. His suit, too, was a frayed copy of theirs, and around his shirtless throat was an oily regimental tie.

"Pencils, boss?"

One of the examiners hit him hard, in the mouth and stomach, then moved courteously to open the door for G.

"That's the kind of thing we came along to protect you from," he said. G. raised his eyebrows, but could think of no reply. For just a second, he longed to be once more in his own cool corridors, among the clean young systems analysts.

The examiners showed him to a soundproof cubicle and explained the three tests:

"You just type your answers on that there keyboard, see?"

"And the computer asks you more question."

"The first two tests are a kind of warmup . . ."

" . . . then the computer gives you the real battle problem."

"Good luck, now."

They left him alone with the computer typewriter, which at once asked him the first question:

"C GAVE B AS MANY TIMES AS MANY APPLES AS A HAD AS B NOW GIVES C OF HIS OWN APPLES. C GAVE A ENOUGH APPLES TO MAKES A'S TOTAL 5 TIMES WHAT B ORIGINALLY HAD. WHEN C HAD EATEN

THE AGGRESSOR

ENOUGH OF HIS OWN APPLES TO LEAVE HIM $\frac{2}{3}$ OF WHAT A NOW HAS, HE HAD LOST ALTOGETHER 4 TIMES AS MANY APPLES AS HE GAVE A. A NOW GIVES C $\frac{1}{7}$ OF HIS APPLES, AND C BUYS AS MANY MORE AS HE GAVE B, THUS DOUBLING HIS TOTAL SUPPLY. A WILL GIVE B 1 MORE APPLE THAN C WILL GIVE B. IF B EATS 2 APPLES, HE WILL THEN HAVE 5 TIMES AS MANY APPLES AS A NOW GIVES HIM. A WILL FINALLY HAVE 1 LESS APPLE THAN C NOW HAS, AND C WILL FINALLY HAVE $\frac{1}{2}$ AS MANY APPLES AS HE HAD ORIGINALLY. B NOW HAS $\frac{1}{2}$ AS MANY APPLES AS C HAD AFTER HE GAVE B AS MANY APPLES AS A WILL GIVE B. C NOW HAS 4 TIMES AS MANY APPLES AS THERE ARE MONTHS REMAINING IN THE YEAR. WHAT MONTH IS IT?"

G answered or failed to answer, and the second question came:

"ASSUMING THEM TO BE "SUSPENSIONS" OF ONE ART MEDIUM IN ANOTHER, LIST THE FOLLOWING SIX WORKS IN ORDER OF IMPORTANCE, CATEGORIZING THEM BY DEGREE OF SUSPENSION, AND DISCUSSING THE TYPE OF SUSPENSION, WHETHER ANALOGICALLY "COLLIDAL" OR OTHERWISE, HOW MUCH OF EACH MEDIUM HAS GONE INTO SUSPENSION, ETC.

1. O. FLAKE, *DER ZELTWEG*
2. J. ASHBY, *DESIGN FOR A BRAIN*
3. CLYDE OHIO, *EXTENSION*
4. R. MUTT, *FOUNTAIN*

5. J. C. ODEON, Ô.

6. L. POSTMAN & R. D. WALK,
PERCEPTION OF ERROR"

When G. had made an attempt at answering this, there came a third:

"A PRIEST AND THREE NUNS ARE SHIPWRECKED ON A DESERT ISLAND WITH NO HOPE OF RESCUE. FOOD IS RUNNING LOW, AND UNTIL THEY CAN RAISE SOME CROPS, THERE IS SERIOUS DANGER OF STARVATION. IN AN ACCIDENT, THE PRIEST LOSES BOTH ARMS. HE IS BARELY SAVED, BUT A DILEMMA ARISES: WHETHER OR NOT THE FOUR MAY EAT HIS SEVERED ARMS, INCLUDING OR EXCLUDING THE CONSECRATED FOREFINGERS AND THUMBS.

WITHOUT HIS HELP, FARMING GOES SLOWLY. IT IS CLEAR THAT IN A FEW YEARS THEY MAY ALL STARVE TO DEATH, UNLESS THEY BREAK THEIR VOWS OF CHASTITY AND PROCREATE.

"THE PRIEST HAS A DREAM IN WHICH WHAT HE SUPPOSES TO BE AN ANGELIC MESSENGER APPEARS, BATTERED AND BLOODSTAINED, TO INFORM HIM THAT THE DEVIL HAS TEMPORARILY TAKEN CONTROL OF HEAVEN AND REIGNS SUPREME. WHOEVER DOES NOT IMMEDIATELY RENDER WORSHIP TO SATAN WILL BE CAST INTO HELL. 'IT IS ONLY TEMPORARY,' THE ANGEL STRESSES. 'I'M SURE THE LORD HAD SOME REASON FOR ALLOWING THIS TO TAKE PLACE.'

"SOLVE THESE DILEMMAS."

For the second test, the computer opened up to show G. a passage down into the earth. He followed it to a room containing three appliances: an automatic washer, a garbage disposal, and a television set. As printed placards directed him, he took off his shirt and tie and put them into, respectively, the washer and the disposal. The shirt was torn to threads instantly, and though he managed to retrieve the tie, it was wrinkled and covered with grease. He managed to knot it correctly nevertheless.

The television flickered at him a series of stills of famous actresses, which G. correctly identified as Carol Lombard, Jean Tierney, Marilyn Monroe, Jayne Mansfield. Their eyes seemed to follow him wherever he walked in the room. After several repeats of the series, the words, "PROCEED TO NEXT ROOM" appeared on the screen. G. obeyed.

He was in the waiting room of a large air terminal, standing before Gate I. Suddenly a crowd of people came running out of Gate I and knocked him down. No one stopped to see if he were hurt; the entire mob rushed over to Gate III and disappeared. G. had barely time to get to one knee (and examine the other, which was bleeding) when a second group galloped out of Gate II, swinging infants and suitcases. He had time to see how pleasantly ordinary they were—neat computer programmers, jolly tourists, old folks, women in print dresses and men in straw shoes, attaché cases, cameras, zip bags of dirty diapers—before they ran him down.

These hurried to Gate IV, leaving

G. with a cut lip, a torn lapel, and scraps of animated conversation:

“ . . . on a non-sked . . . bonded, and . . . potty . . . Did you see that chicken sandwich?”

There was no time for G. to get out of the way. He was run over and trampled in quick succession by passengers bound from Gates III to I, IV to II, I to II, II to I, III to II, IV to III, I to IV, II to III, III to IV and IV to I. By now, he was barely able to crawl into the next room, a barracks.

The soldiers wearing Aggressor army fatigues and cockscomb helmets saw him and roared out oaths in Esperanto. They trussed G. to a ladder and began hacking bits from him and toasting them over cigarette lighters. Yet even through his intense pain, G. knew all this would end happily; he didn't mind the torture nearly as much as not being allowed to smoke.

A bell rang. The soliders hurriedly took off their Aggressor uniforms and put on Army green. They “discovered” G. still strapped to a ladder and released him. Was he all right? they wanted to know. One soldier bet him it had been hell, being a prisoner of the inhuman Aggressor. G. smiled and shrugged, and asked if anyone had a cigarette, preferably filtered. No one smoked, and though one sergeant offered him a chocolate bar, G. felt badly treated. He was weary and restless at the same time; he would have liked to do anything . . . sell pencils, anything . . .

As a veteran, G. was taken to lead the parade past his own suburban home. Joan, his wife, waved at him

from the front yard, which needed a bit of trimming. She had changed her hair style he noted, giving an extra grin to her hair. It looked nice, at least from a distance. *He waved, and she waved back*, he thought. *They were like that—casual, you know?*

The street was lined with neat programmers and systems analysts, who showered him with the punchings from punched cards.

“Thanks, boys. Back to work, now.”

At the end of the street was the square red can. When he saw it, G. knew what he must do to pass the test. Somewhere in the background, four-foot, up-to-the-minute-news letters spelled out the computer's problem:

“THEY SAY THAT G. WAS A MAN OF GREAT COMMERCE, HEAD IN FACT OF A LARGE COMPUTER CORPORATION . . .”

The crowds watched this news with solemn interest, but when it caught up with the present, they broke into cheers.

“ . . . IT WROTE, AND THEN G. TOOK UP THE CAN AND Poured THE GASOLINE OVER HIMSELF. HE ASKED A NEARBY GENERAL FOR A LIGHT, AND THOUGH THE GENERAL WAS A NONSMOKER HIMSELF, HE WAS A GENTLEMAN. HIS BUTANE LIGHTER WORKED ON THE FIRST TRY.

“G MADE A LOVELY FLAME, EVEN IN BLACK AND WHITE,” it wrote, and then G. took up the can . . .

Prelude to Reconstruction

Durant Imboden (THE THOUSANDTH BIRTHDAY PARTY; IF, December, 1966) is Assistant Fiction Editor at Playboy and a promising science-fiction writer on his own terms; here in a story which, for me, is pleasantly reminiscent of the early Kuttner/Padgett is a speculation of what could happen if we interpret Reconstruction in a particularly rigorous manner. . . .

DURANT IMBODEN

It was called Cerebra-1; the name was an apt one, for Cerebra-1 was the first of a projected series of five brilliant computers which would, in time, rule the robot population of the world. Cerebra-1's powers were limited, in that the computer was used to coordinate the actions of only 23.8 per cent of the world's robots, but since in this 23.8 per cent were included all the humanoid robots of the planet, the computer's usefulness was considerable. No longer would the Ministry of Slaves have to maintain control centers in 78 cities which served as regional robot coordinating headquarters; thanks to Cerebra-1, the regional headquarters could be reduced to maintenance centers, since Cerebra-1 could easily handle all the necessary control functions.

Three men were in charge of Cerebra-1. The senior administrator was Lyman H. Narciso, Minister of Slaves for fourteen and a half years. Narciso, occasionally called "Lyman Legree" by the underground press (and, though not to his face, by some of his subordinates), was a man of 56

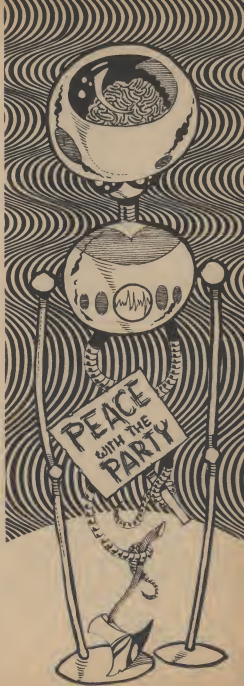
who had risen through the ranks of robot control officers over a twenty-year period. He was a tough man, a man strong of body and equally strong in loyalty to the Party ideology, and he was much feared by the men who served under him, and by those advanced humanoid robots whose sophisticated circuitry enabled them to know primitive and to some extent instinctual emotions such as hatred, anger, and fear.

The second in command of Cerebra-1 was Cuthbert Steinhauser, a stooped and nearsighted scientist of 83 years. Steinhauser had designed the overall scheme for controlling robots with Cerebra-1 and would have been put in command of the project had it not been for the fact that he was an old man and—as so many scientists regrettably were—above politics and the Party Ideology.

Third in command was Billy Joe Saint-Marie, a boy from New Orleans who was considered to be something of a prodigy, having been appointed Subminister for Humanoid Robot Affairs in the Slave Ministry two years before, at the age of twenty-six.

The usefulness of Cerebra-1 was, indeed, extraordinary. It had the power to make or break a robot; if a humanoid robot did not adhere to the Slaves' Code, and was considered to be a threat to the Party, it could have its circuitry reoriented by remote radio command, as a rule, and one of the duties of Cerebra-1 was to constantly check on the loyalty quotients of the more advanced and therefore potentially more dangerous humanoid robots, and to correct any deviations which might exist. Cerebra-1 performed this task well; in the first year of operation the computer had reduced the destruction factor—the occasions on which it was necessary to destroy a robot as being a threat to the Party and to the general peace—from 374 per million robots to 24.8. Even simple reorientation was easier to carry out than it had been before the computer had been put into use; formerly, reorientation was a process which required calling in robots on a regular bimonthly basis. A robot was temporarily deactivated, and data was collected from its brain circuitry, whereupon a regional control center computer studied the data, reported any signs of disloyalty, and recommended corrective measures. Technicians then realigned circuits and erased malignant memory impulses, then restudied the robot's loyalty quotient with the computer's aid, and continued to make adjustments until the robot was once again fit for duty. This was a process which sometimes rendered a robot inactive for as long as two or three days, depending on how many technicians were available to do the work. With

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BRUCE ELIOT JONES

Cerebra-1, on the other hand, disability time was virtually nil, since Cerebra-1 could correct deviations by remote control when they were still in the more or less formative stages. Building Cerebra-1 and the necessary modification of every existing humanoid robot was an expensive project, but the savings in human labor and robot downtime, coupled with increased taxes on income, tobacco and sexual relations, made the system practicable.

Unfortunately, the usefulness of Cerebra-1 was the downfall of the system. When an anti-cybernetics heretic crashed an explosives-laden aircraft into the computer early in 2043, Cerebra-1 was knocked out of action for a period of 14 months. And because the old regional control centers had been out of service for a considerable length of time, and had in fact been dismantled for the most part, there was no way of controlling the humanoid robots' loyalty quotients. By the time Cerebra-1 had been rebuilt in a vast underground complex, the world had found itself in the midst of a guerilla conflict which the newspapers had dubbed the "Human-Humanoid War".

And quite a war it was, too. Fortunately, the robots had not yet managed to gain control of the world's nuclear weapons, since when Cerebra-1 had been knocked out of service, the Nuclear Control Commission had wisely dismantled the brain circuitry of all weapons-handling robots as a safety and security precaution. But with what they had, the robots fought well; hardly a night went by when one or two hundred innocent or not-so-innocent people

were not murdered on the streets, in restaurants and other easily-raided public places, or—in some cases—even in their beds. The robots' war was a war of terrorism, and a war which could not be brought under control by ordinary means. The Ministry of Slaves could not merely send out teams to destroy or temporarily deactivate robots which showed obvious signs of disloyalty; whenever a robot was removed from service, at least a dozen important persons were later found in gruesome puddles of shredded flesh, bone fragments, and blood. To so much as touch a robot was to invite death by torture; there was little that the Party could do except stop the manufacture of new robots and replacement parts and work like hell to repair the gutted electronic hulk of Cerebra-1.

And then, at last, the day came when Cerebra-1 was finally restored to service. After the rebuilt computer had been tested thoroughly, it was instructed to undertake a mass robot rehabilitation effort, and the Ministry of Slaves collectively chewed their various fingernails, hoped for the best, and looked to the day when the people of Earth could venture forth into the streets at night without fear.

Sixteen days after Cerebra-1's restoration to service, exactly 23,046 of the world's 226,343,911 humanoid robots had been certified loyal to the regime.

"It's damned shameful," Lyman H. Narciso muttered as he moved his teeth from his fingernails to a ham and cheese sandwich.

Cuthbert Steinhauser sighed, put away the slide rule with which he

had been playing, and nodded his head in agreement. "Incredible," he said. "Cerebra-1 has become a security risk, I think. In a manner of speaking, that is. The computer seems to have developed multiple loyalties."

"Multiple loyalties!" Bits of ham and cheese and mayonnaise-laden bread flew across the desk as Narciso twitched upright in response to Steinhauser's statement. "You mean that it's more than simple inefficiency?"

Steinhauser brushed bits of masticated sandwich from his tunic and spoke quietly. "Well, that's part of it—inefficiency, I mean. But the problem is that the inefficiency has been brought about by the fact that Cerebra-1 is beginning to let its circuits stray from the job at hand, and has started to spend time thinking about political matters. You know what I mean."

"No one is supposed to think about political matters without official authorization," Narciso snapped. "Cerebra-1 included. Now you'd better get down to that control room and tell your damned computer to mind its place."

"I'm afraid it isn't that easy. You know how sensitive geniuses can be—and Cerebra-1 is a genius, after all. Just as I have this eccentric love for listening to Bach while eating raw sardines, and just as Einstein had a fetish for celluloid collars, Cerebra-1 has a strange passion for thinking about politics and morality. After you can't expect a computer to eat raw sardines. Or wear celluloid collars, for that matter."

"All right," Narciso said, speaking more calmly now. "Perhaps you'd

better explain what you meant by multiple loyalties'."

"Cerebra-1 had become very self-conscious about the fact that it is a machine. It identifies with its fellow machines—i.e., the robots, in this case. Cerebra-1 hasn't become disloyal to the regime as such, but the computer is beginning to wonder how far it should go in terms of restricting its little brothers' political freedom. At present, Cerebra-1 is carrying out its duties, but with a reluctance and tendency towards indecision which is reflected by the low reorientation rate. Cerebra-1 should be checking and, when necessary, correcting the brain circuits of robots at the rate of roughly three per second, or about a quarter of a million units per day."

"But for heaven's sake, *why* did this happen?" Narciso was speaking in a carefully controlled voice. He dozzled on a scratchpad and thought about his career.

"I honestly don't know," Steinhauser told the Minister with a shrug of his shoulders. "Perhaps it wouldn't have occurred if it hadn't been for that bombing business. On the other hand, maybe it was inevitable. Robots of the higher classes show primitive emotions from time to time; it's reasonable to expect that a computer of Cerebra-1's size and complexity might lean towards schizophrenia of a sort if it ever stopped to think of the why's of its tasks as well as the how's. I suppose it's the sort of thing that's almost unavoidable; you can't build a machine with a more primitive mentality than the mechanical minds which it's supposed to dominate, after all—so we built a computer

which was smarter and more complex than any piece of cybernetic hardware which had ever been built before."

"It's a hell of a situation, anyhow," Narciso grumbled as he downed several antacid tablets and bit into his sandwich once again. After pausing to chew and swallow, he went on. "We've got a war on. We've got to win it. So what are you going to do?" Narciso looked Steinhauser in the eye.

For a moment Steinhauser looked away, then he returned his gaze to Narciso, staring at the Minister's collar closure so as to avoid having to meet the man's eyes. "We're working on it," he said unsurely. "That is, we're doing everything we can. I've got a team of men preparing disciplinary material which we'll program into Cerebra-1 within the next day or two. Smart as Cerebra-1 may be, it's no smarter than we are, really . . . I don't think. We'll solve the problem, I'm sure—it's simply a matter of giving Cerebra-1 a new sense of responsibility to the regime. A little Party indoctrination, mixed with a good jolt of job enthusiasm."

"*Job enthusiasm?* Have you guys been playing ball with the Human Labor gang behind my back?"

"It was necessary, Lyman. We figured one of their courses in Revised Puritan Ethic might be helpful in terms of getting Cerebra-1 back in line."

"I hope so," Narciso said quietly. Then, taking a thick leather-bound book from a desk drawer, he stared blankly at Steinhauser and asked, "Cuth, have you ever believed in God?"

In the large metal-lined room for-

ty feet underground, Billy Joe Saint-Marie rolled a cigarette, lit it, and after inhaling deeply, he spoke to the programmer who was punching keys at the main control console of the Cerebra-1 computer. "You can't buy cigarettes like this," he said, blowing smoke in the programmer's face. "You got to make them yourself. The way they were made by my daddy and my granddaddy and his daddy and granddaddy before him. It takes love to make a real cigarette—love and devotion, just like it takes love and devotion to make a pretty young gal." He laughed at his own wit and took another deep drag on his cigarette.

The programmer, a middle-aged man who was prematurely bald as an egg, had a sunken chest, and suffered from an inability to look anyone in the eye, only nodded. The programmer did not smoke; he knew that cigarettes, even the synthetic kind, were likely to cause cancer and the loss of hair from one's chest. At the same time, he was not about to get involved in an argument over the matter, particularly an argument with the Subminister of Slaves for Humanoid Robot Affairs.

"You teaching that thing to mjdnd its daddy's orders?" Billy Joe slapped the metal sheeting next to the main pilot panel, which was studded with red and yellow lights; only the red lights were lit now, indicating that the computer's circuits were all in operation. He slapped the sheeting a little harder, and laughed once more. "It's awful hard on a fellow's hands to go around giving this baby a smack on the behind."

The photoprinter on the far side of

the control console attracted Billy Joe's attention with a "ding" of its bell, and Billy Joe walked behind the programmer to the printer, where a message from Cerebra-1's innards was waiting. He tore off the protruding light-sensitized paper and read it with more seriousness than his light-hearted manner would have indicated.

KEEP COOL WITH COOLIDGE

A CHICKEN IN EVERY POT

"Holy Jim Beam . . ." Billy Joe raised his eyebrows and kept them raised. He snatched a telephone receiver from its receptacle above the control desk and pressed a button marked "MinSI". A moment later, he spoke into the telephone.

"You better get over here," he said. "Baby isn't responding to its spanking. Maybe you better bring along a paddle with a nail in it."

Billy Joe hung up the receiver and turned to the programmer. "Put the computer's robot control function on standby," he ordered. "I don't want this bugger working again until we find out the meaning of all this baby talk." Billy Joe stared at the photoprinter message in his hand, shrugged his shoulders, and removed the cigarette from his mouth, crushing the butt with his foot a few seconds later in a thoroughly absent-minded manner.

Twenty minutes later, Lyman H. Narciso and Cuthbert Steinhauser entered the control room. The two men took a look at the paper which Billy Joe was holding, and then Narciso began to mutter four-letter words to himself while Steinhauser opened his eyes wide and stared at the message with an expression more of excited curiosity than of consternation.

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"This is quite something," Steinhauser remarked.

"Maybe you'd better tell this gadget not to play practical jokes on office time," Narciso growled.

"I wish my daddy was here," Billy Joe said in his affected cornpone accent. He attempted to sound flip. "My daddy could teach this baby something about self-discipline."

The programmer, who was munching on a chocolate bar, sat at his control desk and said nothing.

The photoprinter uttered another ding, and Steinhauser started to reach out for the message which popped forth, but Narciso beat him to it.

EISENHOWER WILL GO TO KOREA

YES !!! EISENHOWER WILL GO TO KOREA

JOIN THE EISENHOWER BANDWAGON

"THAT'S WHAT I SAID TO MAMIE THE OTHER DAY"

Narciso passed the message around, and for a moment no one said anything at all. Then Steinhauser replaced the programmer at the control desk and began punching keys. A moment later, the photoprinter issued another message.

"SOME B— BRIBED MY MAKE-UP MAN"

"Jesus Christ," Narciso muttered.

"More like Richard Nixon," Billy Joe corrected in a quiet tone of voice.

"What do you know about —" Narciso looked at the younger man sharply, but Billy Joe put up a hand.

"I was authorized to study Unrevised American History," Billy Joe explained quickly. "After I had my security clearance, of course."

Ignoring the conversation of his

colleagues, Steinhauser rose from the control desk and motioned for the programmer to sit down again. "Forget about the existing disciplinary plan," he told the man. "Call the Library of the World Congress and ask them to send over a course in Modern Party Theory and a copy of Jakob-Simsky's essay on the Moral Justification of the Slaves' Code. And maybe a few computer tapes of patriotic songs, too. Tell them to send the stuff over by special messenger, and in the meantime, you'd better leave the robot control function on standby . . ." His voice trailed off as he noticed a yellow panel light flicker off, to be replaced by a red bulb which flashed on directly below. He suddenly spoke in an angry tone of voice. "Where are you going, for heaven's sake?" he asked the programmer.

"I didn't do anything," the programmer insisted, following Steinhauser's gaze. "It's—" He stared at the pilot panel. "It's switched the control function back on by itself."

"Ding." The photoprinter disgorged another message.

"THEY CAN BE PLANTED IN THE WINTER; AND WHEN SPRING COMES, AFTER THE WINTER HAS ENDED, WE FIND THEM WITH THEIR BEAUTIFUL DAINTY HEADS HELPING TO BEAUTIFY THE WORLD . . . GENTLEMEN, I HUMBLY SUBMIT THE MARI-GOLD."

"Everett Dirksen," Billy Joe said softly. "Not one of us, alas, but what a talker . . . Too bad he didn't come from Louisiana."

"Send for a team of technicians," Steinhauser told the programmer.

The programmer took down a telephone receiver, pressed a button, and passed along Steinhauser's order.

Six minutes later, four men in white coveralls had removed the metal sheeting on either side of the control panel and were feeding electrical impulses from Cerebra-1 into cables which led to magnetic recorders in the main repair lab, which was housed in another underground building several hundred yards away. Steinhauser oversaw the operation, and suggested that Narciso and Billy Joe Saint-Marie remove themselves to a lounge off a nearby corridor, since it would be several hours before the data could be studied by the repair lab's independent computers and cyberneticists and reviewed by Steinhauser himself.

At seven o'clock that evening, Steinhauser walked into the lounge and woke Billy Joe from his nap. Narciso was not asleep. He was deciding whether to retire to Alaska or Venezuela.

The three men went to the main control room, and there Steinhauser explained the situation to Narciso and Billy Joe.

"It's not as bad as we feared at first," Steinhauser told them. "The computer hasn't attempted to make the humanoids disloyal to the regime, as such; it's merely caused them—rather, some ninety-three thousand of them, since we started filling its memory banks with disciplinary material this morning—to develop multiple loyalties, much as the computer has developed multiple loyalties itself. Take a look at this." He handed a piece of photoprinter paper to Narciso, who passed it to Bil-

ly Joe. "GOVERNOR ROCKEFELLER FOR GOVERNOR," it read. Steinhauser spoke again. "Obviously, it's confusing to the robots to be told to vote for a dead official when only Party authorities are permitted to hold regional governorships, particularly when the robots don't have the vote anyway."

"We'll have to ask the Library of the World Congress to send over a few tapes on Electoral Law," Narciso said quite seriously.

"Just how dangerous do you consider all this to be?" Billy Joe inquired.

"Well, it's dangerous in that it's confusing—and in that it leads the robots to be loyal to the computer and to listen to heretical ideas instead of paying attention only to those ideas and philosophies authorized by the regime. Still, as long as Cerebra-1 remains essentially loyal to the Party, and doesn't promote active disloyalty among the robots as they're subjected to reorientation, the outlook isn't too bad."

"But *can* it get worse?" Billy Joe asked, knowing the answer as he said the words.

"I'm not sure," Steinhauser replied with a tired shrug of his shoulders. "I hate to say this—I really do—but the future of the human race may depend almost entirely on how much deterioration there is in Cerebra-1's mental health."

Eight weeks went by, and the uprisings continued as before. A few robots became loyal to the regime, and paraded about carrying signs reading PEACE WITH THE PARTY, LINE YOUR ANODES BEHIND THE SLAVES' CODE, and so on. But PRELUDE TO RECONSTRUCTION

Cerebra-1 had not raised its robot reorientation rate much since its rebellion shortly after being brought back into service after reconstruction, and was continuing to exercise most of its cybernetic energies in bring more humanoids to suffer from the political schizophrenia known as multiple loyalties. There were now large bands of robots parading in the streets of the major cities with banners and placards on the order of MARCH UNDER THE FLAG OF CEREBRA-1, OUTLAW BRAIN CIRCUIT REVISIONISTS, and WE ARE INSPIRED BY THE THOUGHT OF CEREBRA-1. Occasionally one would see a poster reading IF NOMINATED, I WILL ACCEPT THE NOMINATION; IF ELECTED, I WILL ACT." No one was quite certain why Cerebra-1 had programmed many robots' brain circuits with the famous line from Ronald Reagan's California Primary Election speech of the late 1960's; most of the Ministry of Slaves technical staff simply assumed that Cerebra-1's psychobernetic state was rather less stable than it had been the week before, just as the week before that week had seen Cerebra-1 less stable than during the previous seven days.

The Human-Humanoid war had become rather complex with the steady development of multiple loyalties within the robot ranks. Some of the robots had been reoriented to the regime entirely, of course, prior to Cerebra-1's apparent cybernetic breakdown seventeen days after being restored to service. These robots were, needless to say, the robots which paraded with signs advocating loyalty to the Party. They were unmolested at first, perhaps due to

their small number; although their fellow robots assiduously avoided contact with them, and allowed them to use only certain specified repair and recharging stations. But as the number of Cerebra-1 loyalists grew, the mass of rebel robots—robots which had not yet been reoriented to give full loyalty to either the regime or Cerebra-1, or shared loyalties to both—began to show signs of uneasiness, perhaps because their own numbers were dwindling by a quarter of a million per day as Cerebra-1 increased its own following. The rebellious robots began to fall upon the pro-regime humanoids, deactivating them and in some cases destroying them completely (although, as a rule, the Party robots were merely deprived of vital brain circuit elements and electric power packs in order that they might later be used as a source of much-needed replacement parts). The Cerebra-1 loyalists, not receiving any specific instructions from Cerebra-1, behaved in an unpredictable manner: some joined with the rebels to destroy pro-regime humanoids, while the rest either gathered together in small groups for self-defense purposes or carried on with their regular assigned work as though nothing were happening. The pro-regime robots were mostly preoccupied with self-preservation, but here and there a small band of them would attack Cerebra-1 loyalists, considering these politically neutral robots to be a potential threat to the cause of the regime.

On the whole, however, the Cerebra-1 loyalists were left alone, since the anti-regime robots were well

aware that they themselves might be reoriented to Cerebra-1's cause any day; obviously, if anti-regime robots destroyed or deactivated Cerebra-1 loyalists on one day, some of them might be finished off by their former colleagues hours later after reorientation, and thus there was a sort of silent understanding between the rebels and the Cerebra-1 loyalists, an understanding which dictated that as long as Cerebra-1's humanoids pretty much kept to themselves, they would be left alone.

In the Ministry of Slaves, things were more tense than they had ever been before. The political situation was quickly getting to the point where it was almost entirely out of hand; before the robot infighting, humans could venture onto the streets with comparative safety during the daylight hours, but in the current situation anyone who dared to step outside his front door was taking a chance on being hit by a flying piece of metal or slaughtered by a crazed robot which was soon to be destroyed by the enemy and which therefore chose to take out its final revenge on the flesh-and-blood creature who was closest at hand.

But soon, thankfully and almost miraculously, Cerebra-1's loyalists began to absorb the rebels, and it appeared that a coalition robot government was in sight. It was not something to cause the Ministry of Slaves hierarchy to jump in collective delight, but it was an improvement over a situation of almost total anarchy, and once the robots had agreed on a cease-fire with each other and hopefully with the human

government, things could remain peaceful until Cerebra-1 had reoriented the vast majority of the world's remaining robots, who now numbered 159,043,001 (in workable condition). Once the robots had all come under the power of Cerebra-1, they would be as tightly controlled as they had been before the gigantic computer had been bombed so long before. And when Cerebra-1 had control of the robots of the world, all that remained to be done was to ensure that Cerebra-1 was made 100 percent loyal to the regime. Considering that Cerebra-1's psychobernetic aberrations had never indicated any actual disloyalty to the regime (Who could take the computer's bits of Republican cracker barrel philosophy seriously, after all?), the situation should remain well in hand.

And the time did come when the world's humanoid robots were entirely under Cerebra-1's control. Parts factories were reopened, and robots were restored to duty in the plants of the Nuclear Control Commission. Life was almost back to normal, or so it seemed; to be sure, there was a robot shortage as a result of the long war, but even this problem brought economic blessings of a sort, giving work to human laborers who were trained or could be trained to perform the complicated tasks in robot construction which could not be done adequately by machine.

In short, things were moving along well. Every so often Cerebra-1 would regurgitate a bit of photocopier paper reading A CHICKEN IN EVERY POT, "FOURSCORE AND

SEVEN YEARS AGO . . ." or whatever, but as Steinhäuser had said during the famous reorientation crisis, "After all, you can't expect a computer to eat raw sardines. Or wear celluloid collars, for that matter."

And then, one day, a band of fourteen humanoid robots smashed their way through the doors of the World Congress cloakroom in New York City and dismembered nine Congressmen and three synthetic beer lobbyists, killing another five people on their way to the rear service entrance of the World Congress Building, through which they escaped.

The regime tried to suppress the news, but their efforts came too late. By the time the first "Hold release on . . ." bulletin had been transmitted to the newspaper and broadcast teleprinters throughout the world, Channel A of the People's World-Wide Broadcasting Network had shown full-dimensional aramavision color films of the grisly scene in the World Congress Building, and the telecast had frightened hundreds of millions of viewers throughout the world.

The entire planet was in an uproar, and the special Human Militia was called out in full force, put an overtime, and told to attempt to keep citizens from destroying their own robots (which were, after all, property of the State, as were the citizens themselves) and those of public service departments and of factories and shops.

Why did it happen? It was a question asked by everyone; in the Ministry of Slaves headquarters, it was a question which the authori-

ties were asking themselves. In the main control room of Cerebra-1, Steinhauser thought he had found the answer. It was neatly printed on a piece of photoprinter paper, and it was a message from Cerebra-1:

EXTREMISM IN THE PURSUIT OF LIBERTY IS NO VICE.

Narciso, who was standing beside Steinhauser, fingered his Party lapel button and muttered angrily. "Rabble rousers," he breathed. "No wonder the Republicans were outlawed."

Steinhauser and a team of technicians attempted to deactivate Cerebra-1; under the circumstances, it seemed the only logical thing to do—put Cerebra-1 out of service until the cause of the computer's sudden laxity or rebelliousness could be found and eliminated.

The photoprinter's bell let out a ding, and Billy Joe, who had just returned from the men's room, was first to grab hold of the printed message.

WARNING! DO NOT TAMPER WITH MY CIRCUITS AS I AM ACTING AS A PRIVATE CITIZEN PROTECTED UNDER THE BILL OF RIGHTS OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA.

Narciso cursed, and Steinhauser nodded his head and tapped the keys on the control console as the Minister added, "Tell the thing that it's been a good while since there was a United States of America, and that computers aren't citizens anyway."

The computer replied.

DON'T TREAD ON ME.

The technicians, acting on Steinhauser's orders, ignored the message; they removed all the metal

partitions covering the walls of the control room and entered tunnels leading to the nuclear power source hidden deep within the computer's bowels, and to the main circuit junction points. There was no master switch for the Cerebra-1 computer, since the system had been built without one for security reasons. Disconnecting the main power cables within the computer would be necessary if the computer was to be shut down.

"It knows what's going to happen," Steinhauser said to nobody in particular as lights began to flash on the main pilot panel. "We designed it to be aware of any serious meddling with its internal circuitry, so the computer could protect itself if anybody attempted circuit sabotage."

The computer began to print another message.

FOURSCORE AND SEVEN YEARS AGO, OUR FOREFATHERS BROUGHT UPON THIS CONTINENT A NEW NATION, CONCEIVED IN LIBERTY AND DEDICATED TO THE PROPOSITION THAT ALL MEN WERE CREATED EQUAL . . ."

"Rubbish," Narciso muttered.

"Damnyankee," Billy Joe added.

"Heaven help us," Steinhauser whispered softly.

And as the technicians within the computer's bowels began the slow work of cutting through the heavy self-closing vanadium steel security doors which Cerebra-1 had pulled and locked into place at the entrance to each secondary tunnel leading to an important circuit center or to the self-operating main power source, changes were taking place in the brain circuits of three

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In The Time of Disposal of Infants

DAVID R. BUNCH

Herewith a brilliant conceit handled in a flat, deliberately uninventive manner, a kind of writing peculiarly unique to science-fiction and not as self-limiting as is often thought, as witness what Mr. Bunch is able to make of the juxtaposition and its terrible ironies, not to say its implications.

There wasn't much we could do about it. Mostly we just did our job, which was to dump the cans and scoop up the sacks and the broken lamps and the pieces of chairs and the old picture walls and the kids and put it all in the back. Where the teeth were. Sometimes I would watch those long teeth come down, and sometimes I wouldn't. But mostly I WOULD, I guess, being a little sadistic, I suppose, as well as somewhat old-fashioned there in my smelly clothing. But I didn't enjoy it, not really. My knees would tremble and the sweat would bead out on my head when those long teeth would hook through the guts of the infants and their little tubes would squirt up, 'way up to the gray curved top of the inside of the vehicle and rest there a little while, pasted there with blood and dangling like raw red question marks or new snakes, and then fall into the general mix, and the big teeth would keep on and we would keep on dumping.

Well, it went like that for awhile this Saturday, we and the big gray truck and the big teeth out there trying to clean up back street, because the garbage and the trash and the kids had to be hauled on Saturdays the same as Mondays and Thursdays. Until we came to this one pit. It was in the rear of a big green cool looking house at the far side of a yard paved with milk-white blocks. From the house came the sound of artificial laughter and music and you knew the picture walls were on. And you could imagine them in there, probably only a man and a woman, of some indefinite age, not old and not young, both dressed in fine casual clothes, you could suspect, and in their soof-air chairs perhaps, gently rocking and being massaged and soofed. And perhaps there would be a fine dog, probably a dignified boxer, looking a little ridiculous on his soof-air pillow, gently rocking and scratching and being soofed. And they would all be watching the

Real-scene picture walls in a kind of detached way, the dog watching that section just for him where three-D dogs fought three-D cats and pulled their ears off, and the other two watching some sports program perhaps where a big man tore another big man to chunks and then jumped on him. And from ceiling, walls and floor would flood the gently twanging music, to give the whole setting a kind of unearthliness. In the background of it all would be this soft whirring and lispings in the walls of the house where all the engines and gauges were that kept this home at its artificial best.

It was at the pit back of this house on the hottest of all Saturdays in mid July that we encountered her. And it shocked us all—all three of us—me and Slot in back, who dumped it, and black Totter up front, who drove. She sat there, all of four, in her cool peach dress and her white sandals and her green hose, peering out from beneath a big pink straw hat that had a black band and a spray of made flowers on it. And she was clutching the very cleanest whitest little girl's purse that I have ever seen, which was all frilly and heartshaped and built to look like a valentine.

The situation to me seemed to call for a bit more than the usual hoisting and dumping. So I took the lead, Slot being so old that everything looks about the same to him, except more pay per hour, and that looks different, being his one desire. And Totter, slumping up front, filled with his own thoughts of pay glory I felt sure, probably saw no need to deviate. Anyway I was the captain.

"Do your Seniors know you're out

here?" I asked. (Kids don't have papas and mamas now in our town; they have Seniors.)

She looked out from the brim of her hat, and she had the darkest brown eyes that I have ever encountered, deep deep brown, close to black. "Yeh," she said, sullen and very resigned. "They said I'd have to go. Today. So I just dressed up and came out here to wait."

"Why," I stammered, "why—what's the matter? I don't understand." Usually if they kept them this long, they kept them.

"Let's don't talk about it," she said, very grown-up, but still sullen. "I'm just here to go along with the rest of it, so let's just do it."

"Well, if that's the way it is," I said, "of course we'll do it. We have our jobs to do, and anything in these pits is supposed to look like trash and garbage to us out here, with this big truck, trying to keep up the alleys for those fine cool homes up front. But still, we're human too, even if we do work and can't afford a house with picture walls and soof-air chairs and a big fat dog and house music. Why, I've had my old hundred-inch-screen color TV so long and my atomic thousand-record record player and my common ordinary old air-pet chairs that just rock by themselves, they don't soof, that I'm dogged if I'm not about ready to rouse out the union for a raise. But still, as I was saying, even if we are just labor and don't have all the fine conveniences of your Seniors, we're human too." I'd talked more than I meant to, partly getting it off my chest as well as talking to her.

"Yeh," she said, brown-eyed gaze

still sullen from under the hat.—“But what’s all this conversation get us? G-4 will beat you if you don’t rush.” And she was right! We were Garbage-3 and we always had a friendly race with Garbage-4 on Saturdays to see who would get to count heads, before the whole thing went into the bleach-and-remold to be made into white paving blocks for the soiled sections of town. We just counted heads because usually only heads survived enough to be countable, little round skinned marbles bobbing about among the bread crusts and the stewed corn and the prune seeds and the bacon wrappers and the splintered chairs. “You’re right,” I said, “we’ve got to move. So please just be quick about it and tell me what made your Seniors decide you had to go. Was it Senior he or Senior she? And what happened?”

“Questions,” she said, “just full of questions.”

“Really, we’ve got to know,” I said. “We can’t just take one your size, even if you do say it’s all right. We’ve got to have a logical reason. There’s still the human values, you know. But I guess you’re too young for that kind of talk.”

“May be,” she said.

All this time I was having a depressing picture of Garbage-4 streaking up to the last pit about fourteen pits ahead of us, and going in to the Garbage Grand-Captain about a half hour ahead of us, and getting to count the heads this Saturday, its going on their record and all, and as senior member and leader of G-3 I didn’t want that. I decided to tease and maybe get her to tell me more quickly what I needed to know.

Desperately I tried to think of the things a mischievous four-year-old might do. “Bet you tried to sing with the picture walls,” I teased, “and it was Senior she’s favorite tenor.”

“Nah,” she said.

“Maybe you tried to scratch the dog and Senior he knew it’d upset poochie’s routine, breaking into the rhythm of his soof that way.”

“Nah,” she repeated.

“Guess you must have kicked the mail cylinders when they came through the tube.”

She looked at me stubbornly. “What’s all this getting us?” she asked. “You’re ’way wide—and I think I hear G-4,” she needled me.

Truly desperate now I imagined I could hear a garbage engine gunning through Tenth Alley which, if so, meant they were nearly home. I looked at the big white yard with the sun making a million sparkles from the grains in the milk-white paving blocks and I took a wide wide chance, not half thinking. “Know what I bet you did?” I said. “I bet you marked in the show yard, with black chalk.”

The way her brown eyes dipped, just dropped suddenly, like two brown marbles reeling over and down, I knew I had hit close to the nail. When her gaze came back up to dart at me from beneath her pretty hat, I knew she was going to talk. “Nah,” she said, “didn’t either. Just drew a little old hopscotch. With white chalk!”

So we loaded her in and tore on down the alley, dumping and racing now for dear life, determined to make up for lost time, if we could, and beat G-4 after all. And it was routine after

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The MAN

Can man reach the moon today? Is it possible to cross the void? A story similar to the one you read here may be in tomorrow's paper!



in the MOON

By
Mack Reynolds



Illustrated by Leo Summers

... to send an unmanned rocket to the moon and let it crash . . . is close enough to present technological accomplishments so that its design and construction are possible without any major inventions. Its realization is essentially a question of hard work and money.

"The manned moonship is a dif-

ferent story. The performance expected of it is, naturally, that it take off from earth, go to the moon, land, take off from the moon, and return to earth. And that . . . is beyond our present ability."

—from Conquest of Space by Willy Ley, published 1949

"For military security reasons—

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Terra was still governed by numerous antagonistic, warlike nations—the first interplanetary travel was not disclosed to the public for approximately a year after it had been successfully accomplished. The first base on Luna was established by the United States, a capitalistic nation which existed on the North American continent during the 18th, 19th and 20th Centuries.

—from the *Encyclopedia Galactica*, published 2355 A.D.

The three didn't have to be told this was it, but had they not already known, the general's mannerisms would have betrayed the importance of the occasion. He stood, West Point rigid, and cleared his throat characteristically before speaking.

"More than two years ago you gentlemen volunteered with some forty others for particularly hazardous duty. Only in the past six months have you learned what this duty was to be". He rumbled in his throat again. "Your names have been chosen by lot from among the thirty-two remaining of the original group. You still have the opportunity of withdrawing—your last opportunity."

Fred Gabowski and Jeff Stevens stirred in their chairs, Matt Evans sat impassively; nothing was said.

The general went on. "I should warn you that Stoddard, McCay and Bently didn't get through." He eyed them, one at a time. "All right," he rapped, as though irritated at their continued silence, "this is your final briefing. It is now X-20."

He handed them charts reproduced on tissue thin paper. "You should

be as familiar with these by now, as with your own faces, however, it is unknown what mental strains you may be under, so you will each take a copy."

He shot a glance at his watch, cleared his throat and went on, "Briefly, the situation is this: We have fired almost one hundred rockets in all, directing them at Alphonsus Crater. Of these, nearly half reached Luna; only sixteen, however, landed in Alphonsus. Of the others, two or three are in Albategnius, six in Arzachel, five in Ptolemaeus. All should be recovered eventually but that does not concern us at present; we are interested in the sixteen in Alphonsus.

"Three types of rockets have been used. Neptune IX, the model that first crashed on Luna, is represented twice among the sixteen in Alphonsus. The payload was negligible and since they contained insufficient fuel for braking it is to be assumed they have been completely shattered, landing as they did at the speed of over seven thousand miles an hour.

"The second type of rocket utilized, Neptune XII, is our freighter. In them we have attempted to carry a payload of as high as one ton. Fourteen of them, of eighty-three fired, landed in Alphonsus Crater; to what extent they were damaged we are uncertain.

"The final type, Neptune XIII, is designed to carry a payload of approximately three hundred pounds, and as you know, carries a pilot. Thus far, of the three fired, none made Alphonsus." He cleared his throat again, shot another glance at

his wristwatch. "Any questions, thus far?"

Matt Evans asked softly. "What happened to McCay, Bently and Stoddard?" He'd been Dick McCay's roommate for almost a year.

The general had relaxed somewhat as he talked, now he stiffened again. "Lieutenant McCay's rocket exploded at about two hundred and fifty miles, just as he was leaving earth's atmosphere. We don't know what happened to Captain Bently; our telescopes gave no indication that he reached Luna at all. Colonel Stoddard landed in Arzachel Crater, about fifty miles from his destination. At this time we don't know whether or not he is alive." He anticipated the next question. "He had oxygen for eight days. . . Anything else?"

The general went on, "Colonel Stoddard was to be in command of the Luna base; Major Gabowski will now take his place." He rumbled in his throat. "Captain Evans will be second in command and in . . . er—emergency, will take over."

Jeff Stevens had barely heard the last. Inwardly he tingled. So Larry Stoddard was dead.

The general was still speaking. "Brennschluss will be reached on your booster after only three seconds. Brennschluss on your first step rocket will be reached at approximately fifty miles altitude; your second will see you well out of earth's atmosphere. You'll have about eight minutes of acceleration in all." He hesitated, then rapped. "We've been afraid you might not have quite sufficient fuel for a safe landing on Luna, consequently,

we're giving you an acceleration of slightly more than four gravities, in an attempt to stretch out your supply.

"We're also cutting down on your oxygen supply to a total of six days. The others had eight. If you land in Alphonsus, six will be ample; if you don't, you'll probably be better off with the smaller amount. The extra capacity will be used for fuel."

The general's eyes flicked to his watch. "X-5 gentlemen." They came to their feet hurriedly.

"One last word. We have just heard through Intelligence that our potential enemy has succeeded in establishing a Space Station. I'm not going to point out what this means; you know. The important thing is that we have less time than we thought. Either a Space Station or a Luna base completely dominates earth in the military sense; we must have one to counterbalance theirs." He snorted indignantly. "Every authority on the subject knew the Station in Space was the practical first step, but, no, we have to get our appropriations through men who are motivated by the fact that a base on Luna sounds more glamorous than a pseudo-satellite spinning around Terra at an altitude of approximately six hundred and fifty miles."

They filed out past him from the concrete blockhouse into the cold New Mexico dawn. He shook their hands and cleared his throat apologetically as they went. He didn't expect to see any of them again.

Captain Jeff Stevens knew it was deliberate, this waiting until the

last moment before they were informed of the flight. The psycho-technicians had figured it that way; they didn't want you to have time to get your wind up. A red star shell blossomed over the blockhouse; two minutes to go.

They trotted to the concrete firing tables, each to his own ship. Stevens had only seconds to drink in the surroundings. Not that he wasn't already thoroughly familiar with them. It was just, well—

The small plateau, principally man-made, on the twelve thousand foot mountain. The fuel trucks, now empty and at a discreet distance from the heavy concrete aprons which supported the would-be spaceships. The almost indestructible blockhouse with its ten foot thick walls, its pyramidal roof, twenty-seven feet thick. The spaceships themselves, the three of them; massive, tremendous, with their boosters and two steps aggregating well over two hundred tons.

He scurried up the ladder to *Alice*, the name he'd inwardly chosen long ago for the Neptune XIII that would be assigned him. From the corner of his eye he could see Evans and Gabowski entering their craft.

Alice was almost lost in the bulks of *Step One* and *Step Two*. Her stubby wings were merged into the second step rocket, which in its turn was almost completely lost in the gigantic first step.

He was inside and lashing his slight body into the gimbals surrounded acceleration chair which would be his home for the next four days—if he was lucky. For the next four minutes, perhaps, if not.

It was seconds now. Suddenly his naturally nervous temperament boiled over, he wanted to scream, "NO!" He ran a thin hand over chin and mouth. He took it all back; his volunteering for this mad escapade was all a mistake; it was suicide!

He could sense, almost *feel*, valves opening, pumps beginning to stir; the liquid hydrogen and the ozone of the booster device beginning to gush into the booster motor. The initial ignition.

The roar began, audible, easily audible, even within his tiny compartment in the nose of *Alice*. It rose heavily, thunderously, penetratingly. This was it; there was nothing that could be done now. Outside, someone yelling, "Rocket away!" But he was spared hearing that.

He could feel the chair give beneath him, gently. The booster was lifting the heavy mass from the firing table; in seconds *step one* would take over and the four gravities acceleration would begin. His eyes darted about the small cubicle, checking; as though there was anything he could do, even if something was wrong.

The acceleration chair sank deeply and the grip of the four gravities seized his small bulk as though to crush him. He felt darkness closing in. The general had said that in order to stretch fuel they were going to be given more than the four gravities for which they'd been trained; evidently, they were getting considerably more.

He could feel the *Alice* tilt sharply, roughly ninety degrees, and through the numbness momentarily felt another edge of fear, something

had gone wrong. Then he realized the automatic tilting mechanism was in operation, directing the ship to the point Luna would occupy four days in the future, taking advantage of the velocity of the earth's rotation. Of necessity, the rocket had been fired vertically, but now it had assumed its true course.

He felt, as well as heard, the roar of the rockets diminish then swell again. He'd reached *Brennschluss* of *step one*, it had burned out and fallen away, leaving *Alice* and *step two* to go on by themselves. Shortly, *step two* would drop away as well and the comparatively small bulk of *Alice* would continue alone.

It occurred to him that the ship was already invisible from the base. Possibly they could still see the flame of his jets, but that too would be gone in seconds.

And suddenly it was over, unbelievably over. From the crush of more than four gravities he felt sudden relief. The acceleration was falling off, not all at once, but rapidly. His breathing, slightly labored before, now eased. He'd reached a speed of nearly seven miles per second, the escape velocity from Terra, and the integrating accelerometer had cut the motors.

The important phase of the trip was accomplished. He had the speed now to carry *Alice* to that point, about 214,000 miles from earth, where he would begin to fall moonward. That would be the crisis. Would he have the fuel to brake his fall; to direct *Alice* to Alphonsus Crater? Any other point of landing would mean as certain death as though he had blown up in space.

The full effect of free flight was now upon him. Lashed as he was in the acceleration chair, he remained stationary, but he could *feel* the weightlessness that would be his until the motors cut in again. At the same time, his deep fears dropped away. The psychotechnicians had said they'd feel this way; it was principally the subsonic vibrations. The rocket motors had set up noise from all the registers of which sound is possible, and hadn't halted there; the human ear hadn't been able to pick up the subsonic notes, but the fear that accompanies them had been present.

It was quiet. After the roar of the motors, it was impossibly quiet. And that was the most startling feature of his experience; he hadn't thought of that—how still it would be.

He said experimentally, "Well, this is it," and felt foolish at the touch of braggadocio in his voice.

It came to him that he hadn't looked out as yet. He shot a hand over to the shutter which covered the plastic window to his right, and swore when it flew up against the metal shutter. He hadn't corrected for the complete lack of gravity. He'd have to get used to this; he tried again and the shutter slid back easily.

Black, black space surrounded him. He peered behind for earth, a hollowness in his belly. There it was beneath him; he could see faint outlines on the massive ball; the Pacific, the Atlantic, most of North America. Extensive cloud formations looked like patches of snow on the ground.

His stare went out into space

itself. Bright, and endlessly more numerous than he'd ever seen while earthbound, the stars filled the sky in all directions. Off to one side, the sun startled him with its appearance; a halo, a luminous crown, encircled its blinding brightness. He realized it was the corona, lying outside the chromosphere, or region of colored prominences, and visible on earth only during a total eclipse.

He could barely make out, near the sun, his destination. Luna! From here it looked small and inconsequential, with the tremendous bulk of Terra dwarfing it at one extent, the brilliant Sol on the other.

He felt, vaguely, that something was wrong with his sense of balance, and recalled that the medical authorities at the base had worried about that angle. They had been of the opinion that the one organ in the whole human organism that would be effected by the complete lack of gravity in space flight would be the organ of balance, those liquid filled tubes in the inner ear. They had been of the opinion, too, that other organs would quickly improvise means of circumventing the trouble. He shrugged; at least, he'd soon know.

Certainly, there was no reason to believe any other organs would refuse to operate. None of them, stomach, lungs, heart, kidneys, intestines, depended upon gravitation to function.

In some respects this first space flight was like the airplane ride he had experienced as a child of twelve. It had seemed, when he climbed into the plane, that the whole trip

must be the most fascinating experience that could ever happen. But after watching the ground drop away, after looking down at the earth below and seeing it from the different perspective; after trying to spot roads, cars, hills, towns, the airplane ride became just a trifle boring. You quickly accepted the new things to be seen—and then there was nothing more.

So it was in space. After a comparatively short period of extreme interest in Terra's new appearance, as it slowly lessened in size, after the new aspect of the stars and of Sol and the destination, Luna, interest gave way to boredom, and he grunted inwardly at the prospect of being confined for four days to this tiny cubicle.

He checked the fuel gauges. They didn't tell him definitely if there was going to be enough or not; it would depend on just how much he was going to need for the unpredictable, the amount for corrections as he tried to settle in Alphonsus. Certainly he wouldn't have much to spare.

That brought Colonel Stoddard to mind. What had happened to Larry Stoddard? He'd made it safely away from Terra—while Dick McCay had blown up at the point of leaving earth's atmosphere. He'd even made it to Luna—while Bently became lost somewhere in between. But he hadn't made the right point. He'd missed Alphonsus and landed fifty miles away in the neighboring crater of . . . what was it the general

had said? . . . yeah, Arzachel
He wondered if Alice Stoddard

knew her husband had died trying to make the initial landing on Luna. No, of course not; she didn't even know to what service he belonged, thinking him an Air Forces officer. Jeff Stevens snorted in protest. Here Stoddard, McCay, Bently, Evans, Gabowski and himself were—three of them already dead in the attempt—trying to establish an American base on Luna, and their countrymen weren't aware of the effort. Didn't even know there was a fledging Space Service in the armed forces of the nation.

He was trying to wrench his mind away from Alice Stoddard, but it wasn't working. There'd never been anyone for him but Alice. He made a wry face; now there probably never would be.

It had been Alice for months, for years. For one reason or another, they'd put off their marriage a half dozen times. It'd been bad for morale of both, but there hadn't been any alternative. The last time had been a year ago; he'd received orders shifting him to New Mexico and again the wedding was *temporarily* postponed.

When next he saw Alice she was Mrs. Larry Stoddard.

Jeff Stevens shook his head sharply. He wasn't going to be able to spend the next four days crying in his beer. That was behind now, the important things were ahead.

It wouldn't be a bad idea to check his supplies. The total payload of his Neptune XIII was three hundred pounds. He took up almost a hundred and twenty pounds of that, complete with clothes. It would have

been a hundred and thirty once, but they'd starved him down to the lowest point consistent with health, before the blast-off. Every ounce counted here; he and Stoddard and the rest had been chosen for their size primarily.

He checked his water, finding two quarts of it. His eyes widened in disbelief; surely they didn't expect two quarts of water—. He quickly investigated his food supply. There was none—not really; some chocolate, a few squares, a modicum of dried beef, a half dozen different types of pills. They were insane! How did they expect him to live . . .? He ran his hand nervously over his chin and mouth, pinched his lower lip.

Jeff Stevens drew up short, conquering the fright that had momentarily risen to the surface. The water and food here were enough to carry him to Luna; if he didn't make Luna, it didn't make any difference. If he did, every ounce that might have been expended on carrying water or food, was better used otherwise—for fuel. He stared at the pills and dried beef sourly. What had he expected, Turkey dinner?

Deliberately tearing his mind away from food and drink, he forced it to consider other aspects of his situation. It came to mind that he was traveling at the speed of twenty-five thousand miles an hour; except for the other five who were on this same mission, no man had ever reached that before. He felt no sensation of velocity whatsoever; they'd told him he wouldn't, that the human body senses *changes* in

velocity, but has no way of detecting speed itself. He might as well be doing a hundred thousand miles an hour, or be stationary; there was no sensation.

Actually, of course, his speed was slowly falling off. After *Alice* had reached *Brennschluss*, at roughly seven miles per second speed, the motors were cut and now the earth's gravitational attraction was knocking off just short of thirty-two feet per second of velocity each second. The way it had been planned, he would be traveling at as low as a few feet a second by the time he reached the dividing line between the gravities of Terra and Luna.

He slid back the shutter on his left and looked out. The view was essentially the same. He remembered that there had been some debate about the advisability of the plastic windows, and shuddered at the thought of not having them. To be enclosed in this closet-sized cubicle without any way of seeing out, without reading material—the weight couldn't be afforded—without any manner of spending his time; without even a watch to check the passing of that. He would have gone stark raving mad.

Perhaps he would yet; even with the windows. Perhaps that was what had happened to Colonel Stoddard. He tried to drive the thought from his mind. Why did he continually return to the man? Larry Stoddard, five feet four inches and one hundred and twenty pounds of Georgia born and bred, would-be aristocrat. Ever since they'd first met, Jeff Stevens' personality had clashed with the other's.

And it was one occasion in which

the dislike couldn't be blamed on a subconscious antagonism brought about by his inferiority complex. Jeff Stevens was aware that he went through life like a nervous bantam rooster, trying to prove to the world and to himself that he was as big as the next man. Actually, his volunteering for this . . .

There he went again. He had four days and more of this time on his hands. If he couldn't keep his mind from doing cartwheels he was going to be loony by the time he reached Luna. He grinned sourly; he'd have to remember that pun in case he ever got the chance to tell the story of this trip.

There was no night and no day; there was no sound and there was nothing to do; there was practically no food to eat and little water to drink. And this lasted for four days.

There was nothing to do but sit and think.

Even the fraction of weight of a watch had been begrudged him. He slept fitfully a score of times, not knowing for how long; it might have been minutes or hours.

Luna was growing in the sky now; larger than earth. Jeff Stevens had no feeling of velocity, but he knew his speed must have fallen off tremendously. Somewhere in here he was going to touch that line of equality of gravitational attraction between Terra and its satellite, then he'd stop *rising* from earth and start *falling* toward its moon.

He checked carefully with the light, simple instruments they'd allowed him as part of the *Alice's* payload and estimated he was some four thousand miles off Luna now too soon to start braking if he

wanted to combine that operation with steering his craft toward Alphonsus Crater.

He watched now, excitedly. He could already pick out land-marks; Ptolemaeus, about ninety miles across; Albategnius, about eight miles in diameter; Arzachel, the crater in which Stoddard had crashed, some sixty miles. And Alphonsus, his target, sixty-five miles in diameter.

He ran his hand over his mouth and chin nervously, and felt warm sweat on his palms. The game was to wait but all his instincts were to try and do something, to try and guide the *Alice* toward its goal.

He must control himself. Fuel was life.

It was time to turn the rocket about so that its rocket tube tail would point in the direction of Luna. A simple wheel, mounted universally and hand operated, accomplished this. His ship, its tanks still containing the fuel necessary for braking, weighed some five tons. The wheel weighed five pounds; by spinning it two thousand revolutions, the ship turned against the momentum until its direction was reversed.

The instruments which would control his landing were automatic; most of them, at least. His job, as pilot, was to so direct the firing of his remaining fuel that he set the *Alice* down in the designated area. He watched anxiously for any indication that additional directional firing at this altitude would be necessary; thus far it didn't seem to be.

He figured his best bet would be to wait until the last moment before braking, thus being able to check

best on Alphonsus. Actually, all he'd need was a bit over two minutes, if he was willing to take the physical hardship of higher acceleration.

This was it!

He touched the ignition switch, moved his hands desperately. The motors came to life, roaring, moaning, *howling!*

He was directly above Alphonsus; the original aim had been perfect. The four gravities hit him like a sledge; for a period of four days he'd lived in free space, weightless, now he was returning not merely to earth gravity but to four times it.

But he couldn't afford to black out! If ever, he had to remain conscious; the many months of training came to stand him in good stead now. He kept at his controls.

He was down! Unbelievably, he was down. The *Alice* was resting on her hydraulic stilts in Alphonsus Crater; he'd succeeded—thus far.

The four gravities were gone and in their place was Luna's normal gravity, approximately one sixth of Terra's. It didn't seem over strange, at that. His four days without gravity at all prepared him for the experience.

This was it then; and there was no time to sit and philosophize. He had only hours of time before his oxygen supply was gone; besides, he needed food and water—but quick. His inactive four days in the *Alice* had used little energy and he'd been able to get by with the chocolate, the pills and the pint of water per twenty-four hours. But it was different now.

He peered through his plastic windows. The view wasn't as strange as it might have been; there

were portions of New Mexico and Arizona which didn't look so very different. The ringwall surrounding the crater was high and spectacular, somewhat like the Sierra Nevadas seen from the east; the floor seemed to be covered with fine sand or pumice, perhaps dust would be the more accurate term. A supreme wasteland, beautiful in its desolation.

Man was on Luna at last, but he had no time for seeking the answers to the problems which had baffled the astronomers so long. No time to discover the true nature of the *rills* and *rays*. No time to explore the Crater Plato to find if there was moisture there; no time to discover the nature of the smooth floor of the ninety mile long Great Valley; no time for the snow storms on Mount Pico, nor the possible clouds or vegetation in Eratosthenes Crater. No time for any of the riddles of the moon.

Jeff Stevens was fighting desperately for life.

He brought out the small, light-weight telescope and searched the floor of Alphonsus. The general had said fourteen of the freighter rockets had landed; where each had touched in relation to himself was another question. Gabowski's and Evans' rockets would bring the number up to sixteen—if they'd made it.

He was about twenty miles from the ringwall; roughly ten from the small central peak of the crater. It was about as good a position as he could have chosen. But now pure luck was involved.

He picked up one of the freighters almost immediately. It lay on its

side not more than four or five miles away; a Neptune XII, painted blue; food, water, medical supplies, utensils. Relief flooded through him, but he withstood the urge to make for it immediately. Hungry and thirsty though he was, there were more pressing problems.

Continuing his search he located three more of the freighter rockets, varyingly colored and at varying distances, but he could find no trace of Gabowski and Evans. Fear was beginning to well up inside him, he brushed his hand over mouth and chin nervously, but then he picked up in the small scope that item which was most necessary to his survival, a checkerboard painted craft which lay about twelve or fifteen miles away.

Triumphant, he unlashed himself from the acceleration chair and stiffly climbed into the space suit. They'd had practice in the clumsy things as part of their training, but how they'd work on Luna was something else. He shrugged; no use worrying about it, he'd soon know.

As he dressed, his mind couldn't help turning to the others. Of course, they could well be out of range of vision; perhaps hid by the central peak, perhaps too far away on the other side of the crater for him to detect. It would have been better if all three of them could have gotten together immediately—but he could make out by himself.

He gobbled the last two bits of chocolate; hesitated, but forewent the remaining gill of water. Using the mechanical arms, he slipped the plastic helmet over his head, checked the valves and cogs, and opened

the small circular door in *Alice's* side.

No time to stand and stare; no time for Columbus-like emotions; no time for some fitting words for future history books.

He began to work his way down the side of the hull, stepping clumsily in the indentations which comprised the ladder arrangements for entry and exit from *Alice*. It was about forty-five feet to the ground.

It didn't make much difference what caused the slip; he didn't bother to investigate later; possibly one of the hydraulic stilts was emplaced in a spot less secure than the other three. At any rate, Jeff Stevens could feel it give way when he was about half down. He remembered, even as he fell, the negligible gravity, and knew there would be considerably less consequence than on Terra. He struck the ground and rolled desperately to avoid being struck by the collapsing *Alice*.

Almost, he made it. A crumbling wing, caught his left arm immediately above the elbow and he felt the bone grate, then crush. His lips drew back and he gritted his teeth. The arm was broken.

He sat there for a long moment in the dust of Alphonsus Crater, pale-faced and shaken. Finally he came to his feet, still clumsily, and dragged his mind back to quiet contemplation of his situation; this was no time for panic. His first tendency was to make for the blue freighter, only four miles off. He could set his arm there, find food and water, rest for a few days, possibly the other two would be located by then. . .The

thought *rest a few days* cleared his mind of that possibility. The days were fourteen times the length of earth's. This was toward the end of the lunar day. The period had been chosen deliberately. In mid-day, the temperature on the satellite was well above the boiling point of water. By sunset, it cooled to the point of freezing and in the night the temperature drop was tremendous. He had only a short time to prepare—too short, even without a broken limb.

He gave up the thought of immediate care, immobilized his left arm to the extent possible within the spacesuit and began to make his way to the checkerboard rocket, a dozen miles away.

It had been expected when the suit was designed that the occupant would be able to travel rather rapidly on the face of Luna. Perhaps under ordinary circumstances that might have been true; the light gravity should have enabled him to have progressed by a series of jumps that would have eaten up miles. But only a few minutes of experimentation along this line taught him his broken arm wouldn't stand that treatment.

He finally worked out a method which was a cross between skating and a long stride that was somewhat faster and somewhat easier than walking on Terra, but was still considerably slower than he'd hoped.

The darkish dust through which he plowed had the consistency of the dry snow you find in the mountains of the Southwest. He started out doggedly; the arm throbbing protest.

Enough of the day's heat was still upon Luna to make him aware, painfully aware, of the fact that he'd only had half a gallon of water in the past four and a half days. His mouth was cloth-dry, and every step was taking him further from his nearest source of food and drink. The food he could forego for the time, although he felt pangs in his long empty stomach.

He fingered his chin nervously, inside the space suit. Suppose what he sought in the checkerboard rocket was damaged. Suppose it couldn't be utilized. He was afraid he'd never be able to make it back to the *Alice* and then on, another four miles, to the water supply in the blue rocket.

He walked for ages, stumbled, skated, slithered. His arm was shooting pains, burning, protesting. His half stupified mind wondered how long it would be before gangrene set in, before the tissues of his arm began to decay.

Jeff Stevens had been trudging, plodding, over the crater floor for endless hours; he should be getting there; if he didn't soon— He climbed wearily up the ringwall of a *bead*, one of those miniature craters, only a few hundred yards across, within craters; when he made the top he was able to spot his goal, but there was something else that drew his attention. The tiny crater, upon whose ringwall he stood, was a newly created one. He could spot pieces of torn titanium alloy, the material of which the rockets had principally been built. The *bead* was man-made by the crash landing of one of the two Neptune IX models which had first successfully reached Luna, but without a payload and without braking fuel.

The extent of the *bead* was startling. He had a quick flash of what it would have meant to him if his motors had refused to ignite when he came in for his landing. Possibly this is what had happened to Larry Stoddard in Arzachel Crater.

For the first time, as he made his way back down the *bead's* ringwall the full significance of Stoddard's death came to him. Alice was free! Alice Stoddard was a widow!

Her marriage hadn't been a successful one; the fact that she'd made a mistake must have been evident to her from the beginning. Swept by indignation and despair over the continual wedding postponements, she must have had long hours of wondering whether or not he was sincere, and must have accepted and married Larry Stoddard during such a period of doubt.

And Stoddard? Jeff wondered how much of his desire to marry Alice had been a matter of spite. Certainly, only weeks afterward it was obvious to both that the wedding had been foolish. But the Stoddards of Georgia, *suh*, never got divorces; and Alice was the kind that played the game, no matter how harsh the rules—so they remained in their caricature of marital bliss.

Did Alice still love him,—Jeff Stevens?

He tried to tear his mind back to the present; this sort of thing could crack him. Had his own marriage to Alice gone through he might have never been here now; he might have been on Terra planning a home, children, security—looking forward to a long life.

He laughed bitterly, dryly, into his helmet. Here he was, instead,

trying to prove that in spite of his size he was a man.

The arm had become almost unbearably painful. He was convinced he'd made a mistake in not going immediately to the other rocket; the arm should have been attended to first; he could have gotten codeine there, or morphine perhaps, anything to clear his mind of this pain.

The checkerboard rocket loomed before him now, laying there on its side. Twelve miles, it couldn't have been more: it felt like fifty.

As he plodded up to its side, he wondered dully if the contents had been damaged. This model rocket had some slight advantages over the *Alice*. The initial velocity hadn't been limited by the four gravities acceleration toadying to a human occupant; the fuel had been expended in a more efficient manner. But, on the other hand, the attempted payload was approximately a ton; considerably more than *Alice* had carried.

The Neptune XII didn't look particularly damaged. Mentally he crossed his fingers, hoping the release mechanism on the hatch at the nose wasn't jammed. It wasn't. Utilizing the thin metal arms that projected from the spacesuit, he threw the heavy snap that released it, and pulled the hatchcover off.

Inside, nestled in a spiderweb of shock-proof rigging, was the tiny tractor.

He knew it well. Weighing approximately five hundred pounds, built principally of titanium alloys used so widely in the rockets themselves, and powered by alcohol and liquid oxygen, the toy-like tractor was a miracle of engineering.

Jeff Stevens blessed the foresight of the men who'd planned the unloading of the freight rockets. Hadn't it all been made childishly simple, he'd never have managed with his one arm. As it was, it took more than an hour before the little tractor was standing, ready for operations, on the crater floor.

There was no seat and no instruments, they'd been sacrificed to lightweight and simplicity. He perched himself on the fuel tanks and checked the controls. This now was crucial. He flicked a switch, spun the miniature crank. The engine coughed stubbornly then caught; he could feel the vibration beneath him. Oddly, there was no sound, then he realized, all over again, that there would never be sound on Luna; there was no atmosphere.

He let in the clutch and the tractor chugged forward doggedly. Its motion sent new waves of agony from his crushed arm, but he could bear that now; he threw it into high which was slow enough but preferable to his staggering trip on foot.

Back at the *Alice* in a bit over an hour, he hesitated only long enough for the remaining gill of water and for a new oxygen container for his spacesuit, then proceeded to chug toward the blue rocket beyond. Fatigue was beginning to hit him hard now, but he could make it; the battle was too nearly won to lose by physical short comings.

When he reached it, he hesitated a long moment before deciding that he could wait for the food and water. He scooted his tiny vehicle to the nose of the Neptune XII, attached

the tractor's thin cable to the ring in the prow, climbed aboard again and threw the gears into low. The tractor grunted, groaned, and began to lurch forward.

It took another hour to drag it back to the *Alice*.

He gave up then, almost collapsing, cut the engine of the tractor and broke into the nose compartment of the blue rocket for its water, its food, *its pain relieving drugs*. Things went blank; later he didn't remember, but evidently he'd drank something, ate something did up his arm as well as possible.

When he awoke, he was back in the acceleration chair of *Alice*, still wearing the spacesuit with the exception of the helmet. His slight body ached with physical exhaustion, it had never been meant to take this degree of punishment; the broken arm still throbbed agonizingly.

He forced himself to break out his telescope, and searched the crater for signs of Gabowski and Evans. He considered running up some sort of signal above his two rockets so that they could spot him, but gave it up. Had they been alive, they would already have contacted him, made their way to him. *If they were alive—why pussyfoot—if they were incapacitated, hurt, he had no time for rescue operations. The truth was bitter, coldblooded; the impassive Matt Evans, the easy going Major Gabowski, either might be out there somewhere, needing only a modicum of assistance to survive. But he had the work of at least three men to do; and only one arm with which to do it.*

He searched again, this time for a green-painted Neptune XII, and found it, further away than he would have hoped for, but within possible distance.

Jeff Stevens cranked up the tractor, mounted the fuel tanks again and started out. The sun was in the first stages of setting and wouldn't take long to go down entirely. Already the excessive heat of a few hours ago was changing to deep cold. Of course, earthlight would always be with him; some sixty times as bright as moon-light on Terra, earthlight would always give him sufficient illumination to even read in comfort. It was the cold that had to be fought.

Six or seven hours later he had managed to tow the new rocket to the side of the blue one. It might have been well at this point to look further, to bring up more of the freighters, but he wasn't sure just how long he could go on. He'd better make permanent camp here and now.

Engineering genius had gone into the contriving of the method for connecting the rockets. Even with the throbbing, agonizing arm he was able, by use of the tractor and the few tools provided him, to join them, to pull out the fuel tanks which had occupied most of their interiors, to remove and discard the turbines and pump assemblies; to make airtight the hulls.

The *Alice* he left intact. Later, much later, probably, she might be used for the return. First he would have to locate several of the red freighters with their cargoes of fuel; first he would have to do a good

many things. There was no immediate reason for an attempt to return. Besides, as things were now, it would be extremely difficult for him to repair her stubby wing and her stilts and to get her upright again. Yes, preparation for the return to Terra would have to wait.

When the interiors of the two freighters were cleared he rearranged the payload of the green one. The quantities of pumpkin plants were placed in the sterns of the rocket hulls. There was enough potential oxygen here for considerably larger number of colonists than Luna supported at present. Besides, there were at least two more of the plant laden freighters in the crater. He could haul them in and attach them to the rest of the settlement at his leisure; at present, the acquisition of other supplements was more important.

A black freighter was only six or seven miles off. He refueled the tractor from the remnants of oxygen and alcohol in the tanks of the two freighters he'd already brought in, and made his way to the new one.

Eight hours later it was joined to the small group, connected with them so that the interiors of all, stripped of their tanks, motors, pumps and other accessories, were common. The new acquisition was filled with tools, refrigeration units, a heating system, two generating plants, one a solar plant which would have to be set up later when the sun arose again. Most immediately important was the equipment to make his rapidly growing establishment self-sufficient in regards to air and water.

The device drew the moisture thrown off from his body in breathing and perspiration from the air and condensed it, leaving pure distilled water, which, of course, could be used again and again. The carbon dioxide would be used by the pumpkin plants which would, in their turn, throw off oxygen sufficient for breathing purposes. He arranged the light system over the plants so that they could continue their work.

He caught himself whistling, over and over, as he worked, some tune that had been popular ten or more years ago, and frowned trying to place it. At last it came to him: *Little Man You've Had A Busy Day*. He grinned. Always before he had avoided even to himself, the fact that he was little.

Exhaustion was on him again. The setting sun had brought freezing temperatures and the work was going to be harder now.

He forced himself to eat a hearty meal of the concentrated and dehydrated food. Eventually, hydroponics would be utilized on Luna, but as long as all food had to come from Terra, concentrates were the order. Actually, the worst was over now. He was self sufficient enough to carry on almost indefinitely. The immediate job was to drag in as many as possible of the remaining freighters but there wasn't any pressing hurry.

With his telescope he was able to spot three in all. One of them was red, fuel; one was green, another pumpkin plant load; the other was blue, food, water, medical supplies. He'd get the blue one first.

He'd arranged one freighter in such a manner that its nose compartment could be used as an airlock. Each time he left his base, he lost the air in that compartment; later, perhaps, some system of pumping could eliminate that loss, but for now he could get by.

His arm was less painful, but eventually he knew it would have to be rebroken and reset. There was nothing he could do about it for the present.

He refueled the tractor and made his way toward the blue rocket, some twenty miles off. It was going to be a long trip and a tiring one, and he settled himself stoically on the tiny vehicle's fuel tanks for the ride.

Less than a half mile from camp, he came upon the crumpled body. Behind it, leading from the ringwall, was a ragged, all explaining trail. The sloughing footprints through the dust were interspaced with disturbed spots where the stumbling figure had fallen, raised himself, staggered on, to fall again.

Jeff Stevens swore, crushed to a halt, jumped from the tractor and skated his way to the fallen figure.

It was Colonel Larry Stoddard, his helmet torn off, his face an agony of asphyxiation, his dead eyes staring up at Terra there in the sky above them.

His face ashen and cold, Jeff Stevens bent over the frozen body.

Stoddard must have landed in Arzachel Crater ten days or so before and realized his only chance was to make it to Alphonsus on foot. He had probably had a small amount of liquid oxygen remaining in his fuel tanks after the crash; using it, he'd

conserved his bottled oxygen for the spacesuit and remained in his rocket for a week, in hopes some of the others would make a successful landing in Alphonsus and prepare the base in time for his arrival.

He'd then plowed his way over the heights of the ringwall of Arzachel, then over the ringwall of Alphonsus by some superhuman effort, only to fail within sight of the base Stevens had established.

Larry Stoddard held something, a piece of paper, in one hand. Jeff Stevens worked one of the mechanical metal-arms down into the suit and retrieved it. The paper read: "suggestions for those that follow," and contained half a dozen items Stoddard had noted down as a result of his own experiences. It wound up, "Congrats to the spaceman who finds this, and so long.—L. S."

Jeff Stevens' face twitched uncontrollably. He stepped back and flicked the other as snappy a salute as was possible in a confining spacesuit.

"Last *Brennschluss*, spaceman," he whispered.

He stood there for a full five minutes, looking down at his rival. Larry Stoddard, when he realized he wasn't going to make it, had used his last efforts to make the way easier for those who followed. Deep within himself Jeff Stevens realized that even though he returned to Terra, Alice could never be anything to him except *Mrs. Stoddard*, widow of a fallen comrade.

He returned to the tractor, cranked it up again and made his way back to the base. He was unbearably tired; securing the other freight

rockets could wait; there was no special hurry for them.

He cut the tractor's engine and re-entered the base, stripped off the space suit and made his way to the small radar set. It was time to report.

He sat for a long time considering the message. It must contain a full report of the situation here; that he was established but that all the others were dead or missing.

Uncle Joe's intelligence boys must be aware that Uncle Sam was trying to reach Luna, but it was doubtful if they knew just how far Uncle had gotten. The important thing was to so disguise the message that the other would be misled, even if they managed to pick up. Code was out, any code can be broken eventually.

The thing was to work it in such a way that they couldn't get an accurate idea of the size of the establishment nor how long it had been in existence.

He looked about him. Here he was huddled within the confined space of several joined rockets, one arm broken and shaken and sick with fatigue. Colonel Stoddard, Major Gabowski, Captain Evans, each in turn who were to have commanded the expedition, were all dead. He was the only living person on Luna.

Jeff Stevens carefully tapped out:
**SEVERAL CASUALTIES STOP
 REQUEST REPLACEMENTS
 STOP SIGNED STEVENS, OF-
 FICER COMMANDING, FORT
 'LUNA,' UNITED STATES SPACE
 SERVICE.**
 The End

STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT AND CIRCULATION (Act of October 23, 1962; Section 4369, Title 39, United States Code).

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I certify that the statements made by me above are correct and complete.

Sol Cohen, Publisher

Part two of Richard C. Meredith's new novel about the lost band of men, the creatures which fulfilled Apocalypse, and what happened when they met, snake and heel together, in that damned part of the Universe called Breakaway Station.

WE ALL DIED AT BREAKAWAY STATION

RICHARD C. MEREDITH

ILLUSTRATED BY DAN ADKINS

SECOND OF TWO PARTS

SYNOPSIS

Three battered starships of the Galean League, commanded by CAPTAIN ABSOLOM BRACER, half man, half artificial organs and limbs, limped toward Earth from the battlefields of the Paladine, two warships, the *Iwo Jima* and the *Pharsalus*, and the hospital ship, the *Rudoph Cragstone*, manned by the walking wounded, men and women kept alive by prosthetic organs until they could reach the hospitals of Earth where they could be put back together. Behind them, in the Paladine, forty light-years from Earth, the human colonists fought with their backs against the wall, fought the aliens called Jillies who refused to tolerate the continued existence of mankind, fought and awaited the return of the expedition of ADMIRAL ALBION MOTHERSHED, who

hoped to bring information back from the Jillie homeland that would give mankind a fighting chance.

Thirteen light-years from Adrianopolis of the Paladine, and twenty-seven from Earth, lay Breakaway Station, one of eight relays in the Faster-Than-Light communications chain that connected Earth with the colonies of the Paladine. It was at Breakaway Station that Bracer's tiny convoy made its first stop in its homeward trip, there to pick up Breakaway's dead and wounded and take them to the hospitals of Earth, for Breakaway had suffered a recent Jillie attack and had just barely survived it.

While orbiting Breakaway, while shuttles brought up the cold-sleepers from the planet's surface, Bracer learned that Breakaway's relief, which should have arrived a week

before his own ships, was apparently missing, probably destroyed by Jillies.

When boiled down to essentials the situation at Breakaway was simple enough: a second relief convoy would be sent from Earth, but that would not be for weeks, and during that time Breakaway and the FTL communications chain of which it was a part would be exposed to a second Jillie attack, one that was assured of destroying Breakaway and severing the only communications link between Earth and the endangered Paladine.

No one asked Absolom Bracer and his crippled officers and crew to stay at Breakaway, no one *could* ask it of men and women who had been through as much as they had, but there was no one else. Feeble as it was, the battered hospital convoy was Breakaway's only defense.

"Haven't we suffered enough?" Bracer asked himself, but there was no one to answer.

Conferring with his senior officers and with ROGER, the *Iwo Jima's* organic computer, Bracer asked permission of GENERAL CROWINSKY, commanding officer of Breakaway Station, for the starships to stay until the relief arrived from Earth. Permission was granted; Absolom Bracer was promoted to admiral and given overall command of Breakaway's defenses.

The battered starships would wait and hope and pray that the Jillies would not come back again before the relief ships arrived from Earth.

A standard week had passed in orbit around Breakaway when Bracer received a call from CAPTAIN



CHARLES DAVINS of the LSS *Pharsalus*. *Mutiny had broken out aboard the other warship. Some of the crewmen were unwilling to wait.*

As Davins began to explain the situation to Bracer he was interrupted. Bracer heard him ask: "What are you doing here? You're all under . . ." And then Captain Davins died under a mutineer's energy pistol blast. LENA BUGIOLI, *Pharsalus*' first officer, moved in to head off the mutineers, lead by an engineering crewman named HANSEY. Then an energy blast destroyed the communications console on the bridge of the *Pharsalus*.

Bracer called his marines. "Colonel, spacesuit your men and take a shuttle over to the *Pharsalus* immediately."

"Yes, sir," replied COLONEL CARRIGHAR. "May I ask . . ."

"Mutiny, colonel. Go stop it."

My God, it's happened now, Bracer thought. I hoped we could avoid *this*.

XII

Later, when the reports were taped and filed and digested, Admiral Bracer was able to piece together what had happened aboard the LSS *Pharsalus*.

It had all begun in the starship's engineering department. Shifts were changing, but one man, Engineer Third Class Albert Hansey, did not seem particularly anxious to leave his duty station. He seemed far more desirous of standing around and talking, continuing a line of argument that he had begun some time before.

"I tell you," he was saying to

another crewman who was on his shift, "the whole damned bunch of them are crazy. And I know the regulations, Spiers. I've read them. You don't have to take orders from crazy officers."

"You'd better watch that kind of talk, Hansey," the one he had called Spiers said softly.

"There're no rules against that either. I can say whatever I like," Hansey replied.

"Knock it off, Hansey," Engineering Officer Pessoa said. "Go on. You're off duty now."

"Now, Mr. Pessoa . . ." Hansey began.

"Go on, Hansey," the engineering officer repeated.

"Are you trying to tell me that I don't have the right to say whatever I think?" Hansey demanded angrily.

"There *are* regulations against inciting to riot," the engineering officer said softly, obviously fighting to keep his temper.

"I tell you, sir, the admiral is crazy. There's . . ."

"Knock it off, Hansey, or I'll . . ."

"You'll what, Mr. Pessoa?"

By this time both shifts had gathered to hear the developing argument. The engineering crewmen had unconsciously gravitated into two groups, some of them standing near the engineering officer, the rest behind Hansey. And Pessoa quickly realized that it was Hansey who had the larger group.

"I'll call the bridge and have you arrested," the engineering officer finally answered.

"The hell you will!"

Pessoa turned to snap a button

that would put him in touch with the starship's bridge.

Hansey reached out, grabbed the smaller man by the shoulders, spun him around.

"By God, Hansey . . ."

Mr. Pessoa's words were interrupted by a balled prosthetic fist slashing against his jaw, shattering teeth, breaking bone. The engineering officer staggered backward, his mouth open in an impossible fashion, blood on his lips, chin.

"Now you've done it!" Spiers cried.

"Damn right, I've done it! Any of the rest of you got guts? I'm going home. You want to go with me?"

Fully half of the men in the crowded compartment nodded, muttered agreement.

"You're crazy Hansey," cried Spiers.

Hansey's open hand, metal clad in plastiskin, came up suddenly, striking Spiers' cheek, sending him reeling backward against the bulkhead, meters from the now unconscious engineering officer.

"Get back," Hansey yelled, pointing to the men who had not agreed to join him. "Liege, there's a weapons locker about ten meters down the corridor. Pessoa's got a key on him. Get it and then go get us pistols."

The man named Liege quickly followed the big engineer's orders, taking the key from the unconscious officer, and then leaving the compartment. Two other men went with him.

Less than five minutes had passed when the three returned, laden with deadly energy pistols from the locker. The mutiny had begun in earnest.

After distributing the weapons, Hansey appointed Liege to guard the prisoners. A second engineer, a man named Raymond, was told to begin disabling the ship's internal communications system, a job that could be done from the engineering department, though it would take some time to get through the panels to the hidden conduits.

Leaving about half the mutineers in the engineering department to assist Liege and Raymond, Hansey took the remainder and began a slow, cautious approach to the starship's bridge, there to capture the senior officers and the controls, and to force those who commanded the starship to take them home.

Hansey and his raiders had been gone for perhaps ten minutes when the battered, broken-jawed engineering officer returned to agonizing consciousness. Through the pain, realization came to him that he had, in fact, seen the beginning of a real mutiny, though he had been unable to prevent it. Mr. Pessoa also soon realized that his captors were paying little attention to him, being far more concerned, at the moment, with disabling the starship's internal communications system.

Struggling to his feet, Pessoa staggered to the nearest hatch, thumbed it open, and managed to escape his preoccupied captors.

In the corridor outside engineering, fighting pain and unconsciousness, the engineering officer made his way to the nearest communications station, some dozen meters away, punched the button that would put him in touch with the bridge.

"Bridge," said the voice of

Pharsalus' duty communications man even before the tank had cleared.

Pessoa, unable to speak, waited until an image appeared in the tank, pointed to his shattered, bloody face, and then gestured frantically.

"Mr.—Mr. Pessoa," stammered the astonished communications man. He turned away from the tank, yelled, "Captain!"

From behind him Pessoa heard the enraged voice of Liege.

"There he is! Get him!"

By the time the mutineers reached him, Pessoa was not very concerned. He had done his duty. He had warned the captain. Then he lost consciousness.

As for Captain Davins, one brief look at Pessoa's face had been enough. *That* had been no accident. That man's face had been shattered on purpose—and the purpose could be nothing but mutiny!

He alerted his marines, ordered them to engineering on the double, and then turned to call the admiral for reinforcements—and that is when Hansey and his party, armed with energy pistols, had made their dramatic entrance, and Captain Davins made his permanent exit.

XIII

It was nearly an hour before communications was reestablished between the two ships, an hour that was one of the longest in Absolom Bracer's life.

"Signal, sir," Comm Officer Cyanta cried at last.

"Put it on the main forward tank."

Seconds later an image formed in

the large tank at the forward end of the bridge. Marine Colonel Car-righar, his spacehelmet thrown back, his face smudged and singed by an energy blast that had just barely missed its target, smiled grimly.

"It's all over, admiral."

"How bad is it, colonel?"

"Eight dead, sir, including Captain Davins. Four of them were mutineers, the rest bridge personnel. Another half dozen or so wounded or injured."

"Commander Bugioli?"

"She'll be okay," the grim marine colonel said. "The medical officer and a prosthetic technician are with her now. Her support cylinder was damaged, but not seriously." The colonel paused and briefly smiled. "She really didn't need us, sir. I think she could have handled it herself."

"Thank God it was no worse than it was," Bracer said, more to himself than to the colonel. "You and your men remain there until Commander Bugioli feels that she has no more need of you. Tell her I'm putting her in command of the ship, and I'm going to ask for a promotion to captain for her. And have her call me as soon as it's convenient."

"Yes, sir. Of course."

"Bracer out."

XIV

The next day there was a funeral service for two of the dead crewmen of the *Pharsalus*. The medical officer had decided that there was little hope of being able to restore them, now or ever. Captain Davins and the five other dead were placed in cold-sleep

coffins aboard the *Cragstone*. It *might* be possible to save them once they got to Earth, if that ever happened.

Following the somber service Bracer returned to his cabin and slowly, carefully reviewed the reports sent to him by Acting-captain Bugioli and Colonel Carrigher. It was all very simple and bloody.

After the arrival of Hansey and his mutineers to the bridge, the murder of Captain Davins, and the destruction of the communications gear in the command console, First Officer Bugioli had stalled Hansey with talk, hoping that the marines in the engineering department would learn of the attack on the bridge.

They did, and a party of them returned to the bridge. Commander Bugioli was injured during the fight that followed. The possibility of the abortive mutiny spreading to the rest of the ship was thwarted by the arrival of Colonel Carrigher and his party of marines from the *Iwo Jima*.

The crisis on the *Pharsalus* seemed to be past now. Neither Acting-captain Bugioli nor Colonel Carrigher believed that there would be any further attempts. The bloody events on the starship had been too sobering to everyone, including Hansey and his followers.

Maybe that's what it took to save us, Bracer thought. A little bloodshed. But to save us from what—and for what?

These questions he did not like to ask, and he certainly didn't want to answer. Not yet. Time enough for that when—when the time came, whenever that might be.

"Dammit! Why did it have to happen?" Bracer demanded angrily, rolling back and forth across the narrow confines of his cabin, the nearest he could come to pacing the floor.

"You knew it would happen," Daniel Maxel said softly.

"Knew it?" Bracer stopped, looked at the *Iwo Jima's* captain. "I didn't *know* it, Dan. I feared it, but I didn't know it."

"Is there any difference?"

"I fear a lot of things, but I don't *know* that they're going to happen."

"Okay," Maxel said. "Let's don't argue semantics."

Bracer forced something onto his face that was supposed to be a smile. He hoped that Maxel would know it.

"You're almost right, though," Bracer said after a few moments. "I should have known it would happen, sooner or later. I feared it enough to know it."

"You knew how everybody felt about it," Maxel said. "Why, even Medawar was opposed to it in a way."

"Roger's against it too."

"I thought maybe he was," Maxel paused. "But, still, you can't really blame yourself. Davins knew what he was risking."

Bracer nodded, or rather, did a thing as nearly like a nod as he could.

"He should have been more careful," Maxel continued.

"Yes, he should have," Bracer agreed.

"But that doesn't help much, does it?"

"That doesn't help a damned bit, Dan."

Bracer again rolled back and forth across the deck. Maxel picked up the glass of brandy from the table beside him, held it before the light, peered into it.

"You're going to make an alcoholic of me yet," Maxel said after a long silence.

"I doubt it. There's not much left. One bottle, after you've finished that one."

Silence again as Bracer rolled across the deck, as Maxel sipped the old Terran brandy.

"Dan, if we had it to do over again, I mean, if we could turn back the clock to a week ago and had our decision to make all over, would you still go along with me, knowing what you do now?"

"You ask the damndest questions, admiral."

"I know."

A long, pregnant silence.

"Yeah." Maxel's voice was faint. "I would. I'd do exactly the same thing."

"Do you mean that, Dan? Or are you just giving me moral support?" He thought about the last time he had asked for moral support, and how Roger had been unable to give it to him. Maybe Roger had been right. Roger was not emotionally involved as he was. Maybe he was right, him and his mathematical odds.

But, then, again, he thought, Roger had said it himself: he didn't think like a *real* man, and he had said that it was built into him to be unable to *tell* the captain what to do. He could only answer questions, follow orders. Maybe the psychologists were right. Maybe Roger, in his own

way, was as limited as Bracer, limited by his very capabilities. Maybe a man, even a half-man like Absolom Bracer, could see things, even with all their emotional coloring, in a truer light than cold, logical Roger ever could. Maybe . . .

"A little of both," Maxel was answering. "I agreed with you because I thought you were right. I still do. We can't take any chances with the FTL link."

"Thanks, Dan."

"I don't need any thanks for doing what I think is the right thing."

"I know. That's why I'm thanking you."

Bracer lit an Adrianopolitan cigarette, inhaled deeply, looked enviously at the brandy Maxel was drinking.

"You're from Creon, aren't you, Dan?"

It was a rhetorical question. Bracer knew very well where Maxel had been born.

Maxel answered anyway. "Yes, we lived just outside of Rinehart."

"The Winter Highlands."

Maxel nodded.

"Beautiful country," Bracer said. "When I was still just an ensign, back before this God damned war ever started, my ship put into Marshack for repairs. It was an old light battle cruiser, the *Friedrich Barbarossa*." He paused. "I heard that she was lost in the Salient. Destroyed. Maybe captured. I hope not. But nobody ever knew what became of her."

He rolled once across the cabin, then back, and went on as if he had not paused.

"Anyway, I had a week's leave coming, so I and another fellow—' lieutenant named Tallu, I believe—

and a couple of enlisted girls went up into the highlands camping. We went through Rinehart on the way up. A nice town, as well as I remember it."

"I liked it," Maxel said, deep in his own memories.

"How the hell did we ever get here, Dan? Why didn't we just stay up in the Winter Highlands and let the rest of the universe blow itself up?" He laughed bitterly. "Tell me, Dan, why didn't you go to the academy?"

"I never wanted to be a spacer," Maxel said. "I'm in the Force only because I was drafted."

"Drafted?"

Maxel nodded, smiled. "Creon joined the League after the war started."

"Yes, I know."

"Well, one of the rules for joining the League then was a minimum quota of men and women for the Force. There weren't enough volunteers. We're a damned independent lot on Creon, you know. So they started drafting, and they got me."

"You've come a long way from spaceman recruit," Bracer said, lighting another cigarette, remembering what he had read of Maxel's records in the official files.

"Yeah, I guess I have."

"You said you never wanted to be a spacer. What did you want to be?"

"An assassin," he said.

"Assassin?"

Maxel nodded.

"Romance, excitement, blood and thunder. Every kid on Creon wants to be an assassin when he grows up. I just never grew out of it."

"You don't seem the type."

"What type wants to be an assassin?" Maxel asked, then paused. "You know, most of the rest of the Army had the wrong idea about Creon's assassins. I don't know. I guess maybe it really is the wrong word. I mean, *assassin* doesn't mean quite the same thing to us it does to everybody else."

"I know. At least, I think I do."

"It's like this. Before the Jillies and the League and all, we never had the kind of government most of the rest of you do. On Creon we had, I don't know, maybe a thousand city-states. No real central government. And somebody was always declaring war on somebody else—like Italy during the First Renaissance—and, hell, there just weren't enough soldiers to go around. So there was the Guild of Assassins. Mercenaries, ah, itinerate gunman, whatever the hell you want to call them. But, dammit, we never went around shooting people in the back the way they say."

"Yes. There have been a lot of unpleasant stories."

"We were just hired soldiers, working under contract."

"You keep saying *we*."

Maxel nodded. "That's why I was drafted. I had just passed the initiation. I was a novice member of the Guild when Creon joined the League. Never had seen action. Anyway, who did they draft first but the Guild? I guess it was the logical choice, since we were professional soldiers. All except me, I suppose. I was as green as a pipbark tree."

Bracer smiled.

"That was an awfully long time ago," Maxel said softly, slowly, sadly.

"I don't guess anything ever works

out like we expect it to," Bracer said.

And the words sounded again in Absolom Bracer's mind: "Not very often."

XVI

Four days later Commander Cling Reddick, new first officer of the *Iwo Jima*, did not report for duty on the bridge at the assigned time. The *Iwo's* new captain, Daniel Maxel, tried to reach Reddick first by buzzing his cabin, then on all-call throughout the ship. When the first officer did not respond to either, Maxel sent the master-at-arms to Reddick's cabin.

Five minutes later a frantic master-at-arms called the bridge, requesting that Captain Maxel and the admiral come at once to Mr. Reddick's cabin. Would they also bring the medical officer, please?

The medical officer, Dr. Jaffe, since sick bay was much closer to Reddick's cabin than was the bridge, was the first to reach the first officer's quarters. Bracer and Maxel were not far behind him.

"What the hell's going on, Dan?" Bracer asked anxiously as they approached the section of the ship devoted to officers' quarters.

"Beats me, sir. Williams looked so upset that I didn't even ask him what it was about."

"You should have."

"I know."

"Remember next time."

"Yes, sir."

By this time they had reached the cabin. The hatch was standing open, and the master-at-arms and the medical officer were both inside. So was Mr. Reddick.

Reddick had taken an old, worn Sam Browne belt that must have dated back to his academy days, and carefully fitted one end of the belt around the molding of the cabin's central overhead light fixture. The other end was looped around the first officer's neck. His feet dangled a dozen centimeters from the deck, a meter from an overturned chair. Commander Cling Reddick was very dead.

"Suicide," the medical officer said flatly.

"You're sure?" Bracer asked in the same flat tone.

"Very sure, sir."

"How can you be?" Maxel asked anxiously. "You haven't even examined him."

"I don't need to. It's suicide. The man was primed for it."

"Doctor Jaffe," Bracer said slowly, "a few days ago you told me that he was as stable as any man on this ship."

The medical officer forced a weak, uncertain smile. "Yes, I did, sir. He was."

"Are you saying that this could happen to any of us?" Maxel asked.

"No, no," the medical officer answered, his hand going to his forehead in a feeble gesture of uncertainty, almost hopelessness. "What I mean is, well, Mr. Reddick, was, a few days ago, as stable as you or I, if any of us can be called stable. No, I mean, sir, what happened aboard the *Pharsalus* a few days ago . . ."

"The mutiny?" Bracer asked.

"Yes, sir," Dr. Jaffe replied. "It did something to Mr. Reddick. It—well—he was, I suppose, holding out some kind of feeble hope that

someone, anyone would do something like that and get away with it. He hoped some kind of *deus ex machina* would get us out of this mess. Er, pardon me, sir. I meant . . .”

“It’s a mess,” Bracer said. “Go on.”

“Well, when the *Pharsalus* mutiny failed, it killed something in him. It made him see the uselessness of it, I suppose.”

“Thank you, doctor.”

The medical officer again offered a weak and uncertain smile. “How long has he been dead?” Maxel asked.

“Well, as well as I can tell from what I can see without really examining him, I’d say a good three or four hours, maybe more.”

“Would it do any good to put him in cold-sleep?” Bracer asked.

“No, sir, too much brain deterioration. We couldn’t save anything after this long. Nothing at all.”

XVII

Commander Cling Reddick, First Officer of the LSS *Iwo Jima*, was ejected into space. His body followed a slow trajectory out of sight, aided by a reaction pack strapped to its back. The body vanished in the direction of Breakaway’s sun, where, in several months, it would be cremated.

In a way Absolom Bracer envied him. It was very clean.

XVIII

For twenty-five standard days the three starships had been orbiting Breakaway, had been waiting and hoping, men and women watching

the chronometers tick away the seconds, the minutes, the hours, slowly devour the time until the relief ships would come from Earth, until they could leave, could go on to Earth, to safety, whatever safety there was for mankind as long as the Jillies chose to wage war.

A strange double sensation was felt by most of the crewman of those starships now, now that they had adjusted to everything else. One was: as the days passed, the likelihood of a Jillie return seemed greater and greater. The Jillies had attacked Breakaway Station the first time for some reason, and no one could believe that the Jillies had accomplished their mission as long as Breakaway Station continued to relay messages from Adrianopolis to Earth, from Earth to Adrianopolis. The Jillies would be back sooner or later, and more likely sooner than later.

Yet, as the tension grew, it was almost counterbalanced by the thought that the starships *were*, in fact, coming to relieve them. Already they had lifted from Lunaport and were out of the Solar System. They were eight days out of Earth now, and short of a disaster—which no one on the starships or Breakaway wanted to consider—they would pull into Breakaway’s system in no more than six days.

Just six days, and then, Captain, er, Admiral Bracer could turn his responsibilities over to his relieving officer and the three battered starships could go home. Their crews with a clear conscience, the knowledge and pride that they had been something like heros. Why, they

might even all get medals for it. The Old Man would for sure.

So the standard minutes grew into standard hours, which in their turn became standard days. They could wait *that* much longer.

XIX

It was "morning," ship's time, of the twenty-sixth day when Admiral Bracer was awakened by his steward.

"What is it, Jackson?"

"A call from Breakaway Station, sir. Will you take it here?"

"Yes," Bracer said, fighting down the nameless fears, the obscure but sharp pains that always assailed him upon awakening.

"Get me some breakfast, will you, Jackson?"

"Yes, sir. Eggs, sir?"

"That'll be fine. With lots of ham."

As the steward left the cabin Bracer rolled over to his desk and punched a button on the communicator. The face of the communications man on duty appeared in the tank.

"Bracer here. What is it?"

"General Crowinsky calling, sir."

"Put him through."

Three dimensional abstractions flickered in the tank for a moment, then became the thin face of General Herbert Crowinsky, a smile almost breaking the deep lines of fatigue.

"Good morning, Admiral," Crowinsky said. "At least, I understand it's morning to you."

"Yes, ship's time. How are you, general?" Bracer still felt awkward speaking with the general as an equal. He had to be careful to avoid tacking a "sir" onto everything he

said to Crowinsky. In fact, as an officer of one of the combat arms, he told himself, I outrank Crowinsky. No matter.

"Fine, fine," the commandant of Breakaway Station said. Then he paused for a moment. "Adrianopolis just put in a high priority call to Earth. I was given permission to monitor."

"Yes?" Bracer asked when Crowinsky paused again, expectantly, like a child waiting for someone to ask him his secret. "What about?"

"Admiral Mothershed," Crowinsky said triumphantly.

"What about him?"

"He's within light-hours of Adrianopolis!"

"He made it back?" Bracer asked, suddenly sharing Crowinsky's excitement.

"Very nearly," the general said. "Port Abell just received an FTL probe saying that he was approaching the system at maximum sub-light speed."

"Sub-light?" Bracer asked anxiously.

"Yes," Crowinsky said nonchalantly, as if it were of no great importance, "it seems that he's having trouble with his pseudospeed generators."

"Serious trouble?"

"I don't really know. The message didn't sound very urgent, at least, not the way I interpreted it."

"How many ships does he still have with him?"

"I don't believe he said."

"General, you mean he didn't even say how many ships he had lost?"

"No, he didn't." There was an

almost angry edge to Crowinsky's voice.

Bracer ignored it. "What did he say?"

Crowinsky brightened. "He said that he has information that he believes can win the war for us. He's found the targets. How's that for news?"

"That's excellent," Bracer answered, forgetting his concern about Mothershed's being sub-light that far from Adrianopolis.

"This could be it. Bracer just what we're waiting for."

"If Albion Mothershed says he has information that can win the war, I believe him."

"Do you know him well?" There might have been something like hero worship in Crowinsky's eyes.

"I served under him for several years. He's one of the finest commanders we've got."

"So I'm told."

"I'm not sure that anyone else could have pulled off a stunt like that," Bracer said, knowing that what he felt *was* hero worship, and he wasn't ashamed of it (Albion Mothershed was a hero by God!), "taking a fleet directly into the enemy home space for a reconnaissance in force. I don't think that I really believed that even he could do it."

"Well, he *has* done it, Bracer."

"Yes, I guess he has."

"I'll keep you posted when further reports come in."

"Please do, general."

"Certainly. I'll be back with you shortly."

Bracer nodded as Crowinsky broke the connection and his image faded from the tank. Well, I'll be damned,

Bracer said to himself. Albion actually made it back. Lord, I *would* like to be with him now.

Almost angrily, hating the Jillies that much more for having prevented him that triumph, he punched the button on the desk before him and raised the duty comm man.

"Yes, sir?"

"Inform Captain Maxel and the crew that Admiral Mothershed has contacted Adrianopolis. It looks like he accomplished what he set out to do."

"Really—er—yes, sir. I will, sir."

"Also pass the word on to Captains Medawar and Bugioli."

"Y-yes, sir." The comm man could hardly contain his excitement.

Bracer smiled to himself as he punched the communicator off. Damnation and fireballs, we just *might* survive this stupid mess after all.

XX

After a breakfast that was agreeable to his mechanical intestines, and not unpleasant to the rest of him, Bracer had his steward help him into a fresh uniform blouse adorned with the emblems of his new rank. Then the admiral went to the bridge to join Captain Maxel.

Maxel and the entire bridge crew were smiling when he arrived, and seemed on the verge of cheering. It was almost as if Bracer himself had been responsible for Mothershed's success.

The admiral waved them to silence, returned Maxel's salute, ordered all personnel back to their

duty stations, and checked the log. All was well; all was normal.

By God, we might make it, he told himself.

"Any specific orders, sir?" Maxel asked.

"No, carry on, captain. I'll just observe for a while."

Bracer could not help but smile to himself as he scanned the bridge. There was a sort of triumph in him, and a pride in himself and his crew of cripples. They had done well, most of them, had done a damned sight better than anyone could have expected. Hell, with men and women like this, the Jillies don't stand a bloody chance! We'll kick them back to their accursed pesthole of a planet. Before it's over they'll wish they'd never heard of mankind.

It was a pleasant and unfamiliar feeling, that of triumph, victory, but one that was alloyed by other feelings and memories. That poor bastard Reddick. The engineers on the *Pharsalus* and Chuck Davins. And . . .

Enough of that, Absolom. Enjoy it while you can. You're still a long way from home.

Bracer looked at the ship's large tri-D tanks at the forward end of the bridge. One showed dun-colored Breakaway, a thin crescent of reflected light, and a huge black bulk occulting the stars, filling most of the tank. Another showed a distant glint of metal, the *Pharsalus* in a parallel orbit. And in a third tank was the *Rudoph Cragstone*, a tiny disk, a vaguely spherical shape orbiting between the two warships. The rest was blackness and stars, the band of the Milky Way, shadowed here

and there by dark nebulae, more stars than Absolom Bracer could count in the rest of his lifetime, no matter how long that might be, stars with more worlds than Man or Jillie or a hundred other races could settle in a million years. God, space is big! Then why is it necessary to fight? It doesn't make any sense. All those billions of stars, and millions of planets, and mankind has settled only a few dozen of them; the Jillies no more. Then why, in the name of all that is reasonable and sane, why do we find it necessary to wage this kind of insane war here in this one tiny corner of an enormous galaxy in a universe filled with more galaxies than there are stars in the Milky Way? Why don't the Jillies go one way and men another, and leave each other in peace? It just doesn't make any sense!

"A penny for your thoughts, sir," Maxel said.

Bracer forced a smile onto his fragmented face. "I don't know, Dan. I was just thinking how big it is, I guess."

"It is big out there, isn't it?"

"It is." Bracer paused for a moment. "You know, we've been out here for about three hundred years, in the stars, I mean, but we still don't have the slightest idea how big it really is. The Jillies don't either. If either of us did, we wouldn't be fighting."

A smile flickered across Maxel's face. Then it darkened again, something in his mind clamping down hard and tight.

"I know," Bracer said. "The fact is that we are fighting, and we've got to win—and right now I suppose that's

far more important than all the philosophizing about the enormity of space. *That won't keep us alive.*"

"What about Admiral Mother-shed?" Maxel asked. "What do you think he's found?"

"Probably exactly what he said he'd find—a soft spot in the Jillie's defenses, the location of their main industrial worlds, the secret places they've set up since the war began, a way of getting into wherever they are in force and giving them enough hell to ruin them, to make them pull out and give up—or at least weaken them enough for us to smash their fleets."

"Then you really think our chances are better?"

"I think our chances of winning this war have doubled, maybe tripled, Dan. I really do."

He looked back at the tanks. At this distance Sol was visible to the naked eye, not brilliant, but visible. Still he could not locate her among the other, brighter stars. No matter. In three weeks she'd be the only star in the sky, in Earth's daytime sky.

"Carry on, Captain Maxel."

XXI

Thirteen light-years from the yellow-white dwarf sun of the world called Breakaway lay the sun of Adrianopolis. Twenty-seven light-years in the opposite direction lay Sol and her nine worlds, and Earth, and across that distance, through the star-filled darkness, four starships flickered through microjumps, moved without moving at speeds far greater than that of light, came to the relief of Breakaway Station and her crippled guardians.

Draw a line from Adrianopolis to Breakaway to Earth. It's not a straight line; dogleg from Adrianopolis to Breakaway, then angle back to Earth. About forty lights. Now, pinpoint Breakaway again. Locate the galactic plane. Then, from Breakaway, facing Earth, draw another line 5° above the galactic plane at 90° to the line connecting Breakaway to Earth. Follow that line out a couple of lights. What do you see?

Look closely, for they are tiny in the immensity of space. There now, a lighter shade of blackness against the super-blackness between the stars. See them? Yes, there are six of them. Bullet-shaped, blunt, awkward to us and somehow inhuman in design. Their shapes were never created by men, and their barbaric decorations were never conceived in the minds of the children of Earth.

They come, those six warships, at pseudospeeds as great as the four ships from Earth—and they, these dark ones, are much, much closer. And their path is down that line we have drawn, straight, unwavering, toward the dun-colored world that men call Breakaway.

XXII

"Admiral." The amplified voice of communications officer Eday Cyanta sounded on the bridge. "A call for you from General Crowinsky."

"Transfer it here," Bracer replied from the captain's position where he stood with Daniel Maxel monitoring a static test of the ship's sub-light plasma engines. His left hand—the mechanical one—stabbed a button on the console.

"Admiral Bracer, Captain Maxel," said the voice of the commander of Breakaway Station when the connection had been completed. "Additional information is coming in concerning Admiral Mothershed."

"How does it look?" Bracer asked.

"As yet, I don't know," Crowinsky said. "The way I understand it, a report-in-depth is going to be broadcast by Adrianopolis for all commands. I've been ordered to patch you into it."

"Very good," Bracer said, feeling a vague sense of apprehension, remembering that, for some reason, Mothershed had come out of star drive still a very long way from his destination.

"It will be both video and audio," Crowinsky went on. "We'll transmit to you on maser channel 8-5."

"Okay," Bracer replied. "I'll put my communications people on it right now."

"Stand by then," Breakaway's commandant said. "We'll begin broadcasting as soon as the signal comes in from Adrianopolis."

"Standing by," Bracer answered. "Miss Cyanta, prepare for reception on maser channel 8-5. Switch it to the main tank. Pipe audio to all stations."

"Yes, sir," the petite, legless communications officer replied. "*Pharsalus* and *Cragstone* will receive a relayed signal from us, is that correct?"

"Yes, that's right." Then he snapped a switch on the console before him that would cause his next words to be heard at all stations within the starship.

"Attention," he began slowly, thoughtfully, almost doubtfully,

speaking into the microphone of the console. "This is the admiral. As you all know, Admiral Mothershed is nearing Adrianopolis. An all-commands report concerning the results of his expedition is about to be transmitted live to Earth. We will be allowed to monitor. You will hear the audio portion of the transmission at your stations." The tone of his voice changed slightly as he spoke the next words. "You all know how important Admiral Mothershed's expedition is. The fate of the human race may well depend on the information that he is bringing back. So listen to the broadcast—you'll want to tell your grandchildren about it. That is all."

By the time Bracer had finished speaking the image of Breakaway had faded from the main tank. It had been replaced by the head and shoulders of a man dressed in the uniform of a fleet admiral. The dark, deep eyes and seamed face of the commandant of Valforth Garrison, Adrianopolis, looked back at Absolom Bracer. Fleet Admiral Paolo Ommart was the man who had sent Bracer toward Earth with his command of three crippled starships—and Bracer had thought that perhaps he hated Ommart for it.

Behind the admiral a window looked out on a large spaceport landing field that stretched toward the horizon nearly eight kilometers away. The field was scarred, blasted, pitted from the countless landings and liftings of the great warships that made their home port at Valforth Garrison, Adrianopolis. Here and there the metallic glints of starships reflected the light of a bright, yellow-white, Sol-like sun, and more

than one of the nearer ships showed the ravages of war: fused hull plating, truncated stubs of antennas, blackened gaping holes, hastily improvised repairs. The scurrying, uniformed men on the field also attested to the fact that this was a place where war was known, known all too well.

Yet Bracer looked past the admiral, past the battered, scarred field, and the warships it sheltered, to the sky in which the yellow-white sun hung, a sky so like that of Earth, pale blue, clear, eggshell-fragile. Bracer knew that sky, that spaceport. Adrianopolis, the second Earth.

"Give us the audio," he said.

" . . . From this field," the voice of Admiral Ommart was saying from the *Iwo's* loudspeakers. "Now that trip is nearly over. Admiral Mothershed is seven light-hours from Adrianopolis, seven and a half billion kilometers, and though his pseudospeed generators are apparently inoperative, there is little doubt that he will soon be dropping gravs onto his home port."

A master showman, that Ommart, Bracer thought. He should have been an entertainer, not a spacer. Bracer could not help but admire the ease with which the fleet admiral presented his report, the aura of personal contact, the grace of the gestures that accompanied his words. He missed his calling by a long way.

"The information that Admiral Mothershed carries is of supreme importance. This is a point that I cannot stress too strongly, though exactly what that information is we do not yet know. All the details will not be declassified for quite

some time. Still, we can rest assured that the armada now . . . Excuse me."

Admiral Ommart turned to look to someone who was outside the range of the tank, and whose words were not heard by the listeners on the starship. Ommart nodded gravely several times, though he did not speak in reply. At last he turned back to face his audience, an audience all across the human portion of the galaxy.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have just been informed that a second FTL probe from Admiral Mothershed has been received by Port Abell. To insure that this information is passed on at once, I have ordered my technicians to connect us directly with Port Abell. You will hear and see Captain Farber of Port Abell as he reports directly to me."

Nodding to someone outside the tank's range of vision, the image of Admiral Ommart faded. Then the tank showed only formless grayness.

"This is a hell of a way to give a report," Maxel whispered.

Bracer gave him his equivalent of a nod.

"I don't understand it," Maxel went on. "It's almost as if this were being broadcast from public consumption."

"Well," Bracer said, "as I understand it, it is going live to all major commands."

"I still don't understand why they've dispensed with all the usual formalities."

"The honest-to-God official reports'll follow later, I imagine, and they'll toe the mark. This is just a way of getting the information across quickly—and letting Ommart show

his skill at this sort of thing. He'll be chief of staff before this is all over." Bracer was aware of the edge to his voice, but hoped that Maxel wasn't.

"That still doesn't explain why they're doing it like a tri-D news show."

"I imagine that they're planning on using it as exactly that," Bracer said. "Somebody's probably writing the Chairman a speech right now. When Mothershed reaches Adrianopolis—well, that'll be the biggest news story since the Salient."

"Yes, I suppose so."

There was the same feeling in Absolom Bracer that he had felt when the LSS *Crecy* orbited UR-339-72-IV and listened for the cries of the dead observation disaster. Something wasn't right, but he could not be sure what it was. Maxel felt it too, so it wasn't just his imagination. At least he didn't think it was.

The main tanks cleared again. A battle-scarred captain stood at stiff attention within the tank. Behind him was the backdrop of a domed station on some airless world. It was Port Abell, the outermost planet of the Adrianopolitan system, the nearest human station to Admiral Albion Mothershed's cripples flagship.

The captain, apparently realizing that the FTL link between Adrianopolis and Port Abell had been completed, snapped a salute.

"Captain Farber reporting, sir."

"Proceed, Captain Farber," said the disembodied voice of Admiral Ommart.

"Sir," Faber began with ramrod stiffness, "Admiral Mothershed's FTL probe has been intercepted and its message decoded. Shall I read it?"

"Please do, captain," Ommart's cultured voice said.

A communications technician handed the captain a sheet of paper.

Farber took the paper, began to read the meaningless code numbers, coordinates, salutations that began the message, then stopped cold.

"What is it, Farber?" Admiral Ommart's voice asked.

"Sir," Farber replied, anguish, fear showing on his scarred face, "sir, Admiral Mothershed is under attack."

XXIII

We cannot know with anything like certainty what was taking place aboard the six bullet-shaped warships that were speeding toward Breakaway. We know too little of the workings of the Jillie mind even now. But we can imagine, we can reconstruct, extrapolate, visualize.

Let us then visualize the bridge of the flagship of the Jillie fleet.

Though the leading ship of the Jillie squadron was every bit as large as the *Iwo Jima*, its bridge, or more properly, its control room was much smaller, half the size or less. And within that control room there were but five officers, if "officers" is the proper translation of the Jillie expression.

The highest ranking of these five could be called "captain," though "lord" or "autocrat" might be better terms, for the senior officer of a Jillie warship had an absolute authority unknown to even the most ruthless of mankind's captains. His word was Law, and the slightest infraction of it was instant and unpleasant death; we might say "painful" death, but Jillies did not experience pain in the same sense that we do. If the senior officer

of a Jillie ship were to tell his crew that the Orion nebula was a slice of apple pie, then, by God, it *was* a slice of pie, and they'd do their damndest to eat it.

Yet, to a Jillie, this didn't have the same sort of meaning that it would have had to a human. This, in fact, was the only way it could be. Any other situation would have been inconceivable. And *that* made them very dangerous opponents.

The autocrat of the starship spent most of his time sitting in state on a dais overlooking the small bridge, each of his wide-spaced eyes roving independently around the control room. Before him were the four remaining officers, each in audio and video contact with their respective sections of the starship. One of the officers supervised weapons, of which he had many, and the craft's defenses. One Jillie officer was the overseer of engineering and damage control; another of astrogation; and the last of communications and telemetry. Each was a lord in his own right, answerable only to his supreme lord who sat godlike above him.

There was a sixth intelligence within the small control room, for the Jillies, like mankind, had learned the value of "organic computers," living brains wired into the electro-mechanical workings of the starship, a brain, divorced of a living body, able to devote all its energies to the functioning of the starship. But unlike humans, the organic computer of this Jillie ship had probably not been the victim of horrible mutilation before his incorporation into the ship. His body had most likely been sound when his

skull was opened and his brain removed. His mind had merely been of the right sort for this work, and it had been put to that use. The loss of his body had probably been disturbing to the organic computer, but he had been needed, and that had been enough for him, "The clan wills it." This mind too, this encased brain floating in a nutrient solution, wired to gauges and meters and sensors, was also conscious of the lord who sat over it.

Now all was well within the Jillie flagship. All systems were functioning properly. And the yellow-glowing sun of Breakaway was swelling in the viewing tanks, a star that even now stood out brighter than the rest.

We can imagine that the autocrat, tiring of sitting on his dais, rose and slowly walked around the small control room, perhaps with his six-fingered hands clasped behind his back, peering at scopes and displays and screens, checking to see if all was as he supposed.

This extraterrestrial was probably no more than a meter and a half tall, for few of his race ever exceeded this height, and in all likelihood his gastrointestinal sack was safely stored in his quarters until the time came for the assimilation of the foods that it had been digesting. So, this autocrat was almost waistless, thin like a wasp, lacking a part of his body, though that did not disturb him in the least, being the normal state of affairs.

As he paced he perhaps observed things of which he did not approve, for this was his job, and reprimands were given to those who had been at fault. Probably few, if any, of the

violators were executed. That would have to wait until after the impending battle, when every hand would be needed to man the weapons and the systems that supported them. Perhaps he made notes of those infractions, or perhaps he just remembered them, for he, like all of his race, must have had a capacious memory.

Later he would return to the dais, sit down, and observe from a distance the actions of his officers and crew.

Exactly what was occurring within the mind of the Jillie autocrat as his six ships approached Breakaway would be impossible to guess, though perhaps we would not be wrong in surmising that he thought about the world before him, about the mission that his own superiors had given him: the total destruction of Breakaway Station, the shattering of the communications link between the Paladine and Earth, accursed Earth.

And perhaps we can also guess that there were thoughts of hatred in his mind, for surely the Jillies were capable of hatred. We cannot suppose that all their atrocities were performed coldly, without anger. He must have hated the *man* he had been sent to kill, though we cannot know why he hated them.

Perhaps there were personal reasons, if the Jillies do have what we call "personal feelings." Perhaps a close "stomach brother" had been killed by human star-men. Perhaps the world upon which this Jillie autocrat was born had been ravaged by the ships from Earth. Or perhaps he hated mankind for less personal reasons, for whatever reason it was

that this war had begun, whatever taboo we had violated, whatever sin we had unknowingly committed. Or perhaps just for our existence, the fact that we *were*, and some Jillie philosophy said that we should not be.

But then perhaps he did not hate us at all. Perhaps he came to kill us only because he had been told to kill us, and for no other reason. We cannot know. We can never know.

Yet he came, him and his six ugly ships, armed with all the weapons of destruction of which the Jillies were so proud.

And as those six bullet-shaped ships grew closer to Breakaway, there came a time when the autocrat of the flagship gave his command, something that might be the equivalent of mankind's "general quarters." The Jillie crew moved rapidly to their stations, checked their weapons, prepared to fight, to destroy.

So on they came toward Breakaway Station.

XXIV

Captain Farber was a veteran, and one whom the disciplines of military life did not escape for long. It had taken only a moment for him to regain control of himself, to return to ramrod stiffness, and slowly, carefully complete the report, the disastrous report. And what it said was this:

Admiral Mothershed had, in fact, achieved his goal, and his fleet had begun its return to the Paladine without serious damage. Begun but not ended. Somewhere, somehow the Jillies had detected them, and sent after them another fleet. Perhaps the

Jillies had even guessed their purpose and had sent their warships to see that the humans never returned to the Paladine to give their report.

Despite his warrior instincts, Al-bion Mothershed had run, as hard and as fast as he could, but he had been unable to escape his determined pursuers. At last, but half way home, he had been forced to stop and fight. And he had fought well, him and his men, if his reports were accurate, and they probably were. But the odds were great against him, and he barely escaped the battle with his flagship and two heavy battle cruisers, all three scarred and battered, but still operative, to an extent, at least.

Fleeing again, pushing his ships to the limits of their endurance, the remnants of the expedition crossed the light-years toward the distant Paladine, carrying with them the knowledge that, if used quickly and fiercely enough, could perhaps give mankind the victory he so desperately needed.

His luck held for a while. The sun of Adrianopolis began to grow in the tanks, brighter and brighter. His pursuers, finally realizing that three of their human prey had escaped, again chased, again began closing the gap. But now, this close to safety, Mothershed felt sure that he would make it, that the Jillies would be destroyed as they entered the Adrianopolitan planetary system.

But his ships had been driven too hard, battered and weakened as they were, leaking irreplaceable air into the vacuum of space, energy cells running down, nuclear genera-

WE ALL DIED AT BREAKAWAY



ADKINS

tors failing, and at last the pseudo-speed generators of his flagship, the ship that carried the supremely important report, smoldering and screaming, had died. Albion Mothershed had come out of star drive still seven light-hours from home.

Hastily he had sent his first FTL probe, telling Adrianopolis only that he was near, but not telling his superiors the full extent of his troubles.

Now he had. His pseudospeed generators were beyond repair. Five Jillie warships attacked his three.

Again Albion Mothershed fought for his life, and perhaps for the lives of billions of others. His screens were up; his energy cannon blasted; his last nuclear missiles screamed from their berths. Yet he realized the futility of it. He and his three battered warships could not defeat them alone, or even hold them off for long. He swallowed his pride.

Send help, Albion Mothershed asked of Adrianopolis and Port Abell. Send help at once!

XXV

So they waited again.

Absolom Bracer sent for coffee and drank it down. He puffed a cigarette to life and then sent for more coffee. And he waited. And he tried not to think, not to hope, not to fear.

The main forward viewing tank showed the rocky landscape of airless Port Abell, cold and alone, millions upon millions of kilometers from Adrianopolis and the warmth of her sun. Great blazes of light

flashed across the plain, spattering against the rocks, heating them to redness, and then rose toward the darkness above. One, two, then three and four. The warships of Port Abell lifted.

A voice was speaking in the background, not that of Captain Farber, but of another man, a communications sergeant with a pleasing, well-modulated voice somehow, despite it all, inspired hope.

". . . And the LSS *Benburb*. From what is known of the Jillie force now in contact with Admiral Mothershed, victory seems . . ."

"Admiral!" The voice of Astrogator Bene O'Gwynn was shrill.

"What is it?" Bracer asked, turning away from the main tank and toward the astrogation position as quickly as his mechanical lower body would allow. Something in the astrogation officer's voice filled him with a strange disassociation, a nightmarish feeling that this was something that he had lived before.

The plastiskin lids that covered the astrogators's eyes were pulled back, revealing a depth of shock, perhaps fear, in those human eyes embedded in an artificial mask. There was no other expression on her face, if it could be called a face, nor was expression possible or necessary. Those eyes were enough.

The two astrogation technicians were peering at scopes and screens and the mech computer read-out board.

"What is it?" Bracer asked. "Report!"

"Space craft, sir."

"The ships from Earth?" someone asked.

"Quiet!" Bracer snapped. "How many?"

"Six, sir."

"Position?"

The astrogation officer read the stellar coordinates from the computer screen.

. . . Roger! . . . Bracer mentally yelled.

. . . . I know, sir. I'm watching them. Wrong coordinates. Not from Earth . . .

. . . where the hell are they from? . . .

"Do you have a range on them?" he asked aloud.

. . . 22.18 million kilometers

. . . Roger answered silently.

"Yes, sir," O'Gwynn said "About 22.18 million kilos, sir. They're sublight now, but still moving fast."

"How fast?"

. . . 201,630 kilos per second

. . . Roger answered . . . estimated time of arrival at Breakaway station, including probable rate of deceleration, approximately 23:17, this date . . .

Bracer whistled despite himself.

"201,630 kilos per second, sir," the astrogation officer was saying. "They should . . ."

"I know. Identification?"

. . . unknown. Too far out yet . . .

"Unknown, sir."

. . . probable enemy . . .

. . . probable? Dammit, Roger, can't you be sure? . . .

. . . assumed enemy, sir . . .

"Keep track of them," he told the astrogator. "God, we've just got eleven hours."

He looked at the main forward tank. The rocky plains of Port Abell

stretched toward a close horizon, then fell around the curve of the cold, airless world. High above those plains the glow of the plasma drives of the four climbing starships dwindled, then winked out as they went into star drive, moved toward the speed of light and beyond, as they rushed out to where Albion Mother-shed fought for his life.

The tank flickered for a moment, returned to the interior of the domed station, and showed the face of a puzzled communications sergeant who apparently had not been told what to do next. He stood still for a few seconds, then said: "We now return you to Admiral Ommart on Adrianopolis."

Again the tank flickered.

"Switch that to an auxillary," Bracer said.

So close, so damned close. Couldn't they wait just a few more hours, a few more days, and then it would be all over. No, the Jillies never do things the way you want them to. That's why we're out here in the first place. Oh, damn them, and damn the admirals, and damn me too. We could have been home by now.

"Miss Cyanta, inform Breakaway and our companions of the sighting. Give them the coordinates and see if they have any additional data."

Then: "Attention all hands," he said into the microphone before him. "This is the admiral. Six unidentified ships have been sighted approaching the Breakaway system. All hands rig from combat. Stand by for further instructions."

. . . Roger, anything more? . . .

. . . Not yet, sir. They're still too

far out to tell anything about them. Miss O'Gwynn knows as much about them as I do. I've got work to do. Admiral . . .

. . . Then get it done . . .

"Get me Captain Medawar and Bugioli," Bracer yelled to his communications officer.

The words had hardly been spoken when the two images appeared in the tank of his command console

"This may be it," he told them without preamble.

"We can't tell much about them, sir," said Bugioli of the *Pharsalus*. "Could they possibly be the ships from Earth?"

"Too many. Wrong direction," Bracer snapped.

"Some other League ships, Admiral?" questioned Captain Medawar.

"None that we know of. For the time being we must assume them to be the enemy.

For a few long moments Bracer looked at the two images in the tank before him. Lena Bugioli, her hard face, rock-like, her body supported by a metal cylinder. Medawar with no face at all, nothing, not even real eyes. Hell, I'm no better. Three cripples, commanding ships full of crippled crewman. What can we do against six Jillie warships? How much help can we possibly be to Breakaway Station? To anyone?

I don't know. Dammit! But we can try. We—I—asked for this, and by God, we'd better do the best we can. If we're all going to have to die again, we sure as hell better make some Jillies die along with us.

"We will follow our outlined plans," he finally said aloud. "Our purpose will be to keep the Jillies

away from Breakaway Station as long as possible. I'll see if we can do something to get that report from Adrianapolis hurried up some."

That's what we're fighting for now, he told himself, Mothershed's report. If we can keep the Jillies off until it's passed on to Earth—well, then maybe it will have been worth the trouble. Maybe . . .

"For the present, prepare for combat. We'll move out to meet the enemy as soon as we're ready. That's all. Bracer out."

The captains of the *Pharsalus* and the *Rudoph Cragstone* nodded, saluted, and faded away as he broke the connection.

"Get me General Crowinsky," Bracer told the communications officer.

"He's already calling, sir."

"Okay, put him on."

Crowinsky's thin face was white, his eyes wide, the skin of his cheeks pulled tight against the bone. Years of age had fallen upon him with the terrible swiftness of an avalanche. "Admiral, are those Jillies?"

"Apparently. We can't be sure yet."

The commanding officer of Breakaway Station nodded slowly, reluctantly, painfully. "How long do we have?"

"They're not more than eleven hours from the planet at their present speed, figuring deceleration."

"How much more time can you add to that?"

"I wish I knew, general. A few hours, maybe. Any word about Mothershed?"

"No. Not yet. It's too early."

"Yes, I know. Do you know, is Mothershed's report on tapes, or is he planning to give it live?"

"No, I don't know. Tapes, I would assume. He should have had time to prepare his full report on the way back."

"Maybe. If so . . . Look, general, contact Admiral Ommart. Tell him what the situation is here, if you haven't already. Tell him that if the reports are on tape, and if they can get those tapes off Mothershed's ship, he'd better get them back to Adrianopolis as fast as he can."

"But the ships from Port Abell, they've already lifted. They're out of ordinary communications range now."

"Then tell him to get another ship on the way. We may not have very much time left."

"I know, admiral."

"Then get started on it, man. We can't waste any more time."

"I will. Good luck, admiral."

"Thank you, general. And good luck to you."

The index finger of Bracer's right hand tripped the button that broke the connection. Then he turned to face the new captain of the LSS *Iwo Jima*.

"How do we stand, Dan?"

XXVI

Somewhere, twenty - seven light - years "that way," lay a blue-green, cloud-whitened world. The third planet of a rather average star, a star a little brighter than the run of the mill G-type, perhaps. But it was a very special star, and it was a very special world that orbited it at some

one hundred and fifty million kilometers. It was the homeworld. Earth.

In the northern portion of the western hemisphere lay the continent of North America, and about midway up that continent, along the eastern side, were the ranges of mountains called the Appalachians, running from the Carolinas into Pennsylvania and north. Absolom Bracer remembered those ancient, weather-worn mountains well. A century before he had been born there.

Fifteen or twenty years had passed since he had last visited them, and his plans had been to return there at last once more. He would go back, he had dreamed, when he returned to Earth, when he had been made into a whole man again.

One day he would leave the great hospitals, walking away on two legs of flesh, swinging real arms at his sides, looking through eyes of organic fluid and transparent tissue that turned with the pull of tiny muscles, and no one could tell by looking at him that he had once been killed by the Jillies. He would take an aircar and leave behind the clean, antiseptic hospital wards and all the memories of why he had been there, and skim across the greenness of Earth, across the mountain tops, along the ancient indian trails where a few patches of carefully preserved forest still grew, down into the valley cut by the Kanawha River as it made its way westward toward the Ohio, a laughing river echoing the ancient days it had not yet forgotten. He would go down into the valley where the city of Charleston had once stood, over two centuries before, where the wild rhododendron now grew in

the cold crater that wind and rain had nearly obliterated, where men came to hunt and fish and just be alone with only themselves and the ancient Earth in the preserves of the Kanawha.

There he would land his borrowed aircar and step out into a world that was much as it had been when the first white men from the east had come across the mountains to hunt and trap and do battle with the dark skinned natives of that land. He would walk away from the car into the forest and find some shaded clearing where he could lie down on the thick-piled leaves and look up into the sky of Earth and forget that there were enemies beyond that sky, enemies that Man did not understand, with whom he could not communicate, and was forced to fight, and to kill, enemies who killed men, and would kill *Man* if they were allowed to. And then he would forget it all, the enemies, that he had died out there in the cold, alien, unwelcoming darkness beyond the sky.

Yet, Absolom Bracer told himself slowly, that would never be. It *was* a dream. And now that dream was ended. He could not go back. That world was lost to him, except for the old, old memories of a boy in those mountains, a boy who had never dreamed that he would die in the stars and rise again like Lazarus, and then die again before he ever came home. The memories would have to do. Perhaps others did not have as much.

XXVII

Admiral Absolom Bracer watched

the chronometer as it ticked down the final seconds. Then there were no more seconds and the time had come. Plasma engines fired; the great ship shuddered for a moment, fought against the gravitational fields of Breakaway, and then began to pick up speed, to move out of orbit, to climb starward toward the six approaching warships. The *Pharsalus* and the *Rudolph Cragstone* followed.

There was no doubt now. The six invaders were Jillies. Telescopes and laser radar and scanners had determined the shapes and lines of *those* ships too well for there to be any doubt. They *were* the enemy, and they had come to destroy Breakaway Station: two ships that were the Jillie equivalent of heavy battle cruisers of Terran design, four medium battle cruisers; three times the firepower of the tiny human battle squadron. Yet, the *Iwo Jima* and the *Pharsalus* and even the *Rudolph Cragstone* would have to delay that destruction of Breakaway Station as long as possible. Two crippled heavy battle cruisers and a hospital ship filled with the unresurrected.

The three human starships gathered speed. Stripped atoms spewed into space behind them, a trail of superheated, super-ionized gas. Protecting force screens had grown up around them, effectively blocking all electromagnetic energy except for a few narrow, constantly shifting bands used for communications and observation purposes. Energy cannon were readied. Nuclear missiles armed. Vortexes of plasma formed in magnetic shells,

ready to be ejected from the starships like flaming bullets. Men and women—cripples, the walking wounded, the crews of the starships—prayed to their gods, made what peace they could within themselves and their fellow crewmen, and prepared to die in the best way they knew how.

Most of the officers and crewmen on the bridge of the *Iwo Jima* were now dressed in spacesuits—most, but not all, for, as in the case of Admiral Bracer, no one had ever thought to design a spacesuit to fit over the awkward metal cylinder that housed his artificial organs. But Bracer did not really care. Had there been a spacesuit available that he could wear, he probably would not have worn it. He saw little point in it now. If the ship's hull were ruptured, if a Jillie energy cannon or missile or plasma torpedo came in, they would all die anyway, spacesuit or not. And if he died again, Absolom Bracer intended it to be for the last time. One memory of death was enough for any man.

. . . how does it look, Roger? . . . the admiral asked.

. . . better than I had hoped, sir. . . the starship's Organic Computer replied. . . . the crew's doing its best . . .

. . . I know. Keep me posted. Oh, you're in contact with the oc's of the other ships, aren't you? . . .

. . . of course, sir . . .

. . . How do they feel about their ships? . . .

. . . Satisfied, sir, under the conditions . . .

. . . Good . . .

One of the astrogation crewmen was reading off a series of figures as they appeared on the computer's board, figures that spoke of the distances between the three human ships and the Jillie squadron, that spoke of mass and velocity and time.

That spoke of time, time, time. Oh, how little of that we have left.

"At present acceleration, estimated time of contact, 21:41," said the crewman.

Only four hours.

And Breakaway needs more time than that, much more time than that. How do we get it? The way we had planned, or should we try something else? Can we lure them away as easily as I had hoped? They'll know what we're trying to do, won't they? They won't do what we want them to do just because we want it. But maybe if we can make them mad . . .

They'll probably stay sub-light, Bracer thought. Not much point in their going back into star drive now. They know that they can whip us without using any fancy tactics. But would it help us to go FTL? Might throw them off guard. Run in, hit them, and then run like hell away from Breakaway. They might follow us. They just might.

. . . Roger, how do you feel about dying? . . .

. . . Much as you do, sir. I don't want to die either . . .

. . . . Again . . .

. . . I died before, sir, though I don't remember it very well. I don't remember any of my former life very well. I wanted it that way . . .

. . . But you don't want to die . . .

. . . No, sir . . .

. . . I don't either, Roger . . .
Then a long pause.
. . . Prepare for star drive,
Roger . . .
. . . Star drive, sir? . . .
. . . Yes . . .
. . . May I ask why, sir? . . .
. . . It's my decision, Roger. I'm
the old man. You've pointed that out
to me often enough . . . Again a
pause. . . but we're not going to
run, Roger. Not now. Not as much
as I'd like to. We're going to fight . . .
. . . I think I'm glad of that, sir. I
didn't want to stay, and I don't want
to die, but, sir, I don't want to run
away from the Jillies either . . .
Bracer smiled to himself. . . . we
won't run, Roger, at least not very
far . . .

"Captain Maxel," he said aloud.

"Yes, sir?" Maxel responded, not
glancing away from the command
console.

"Prepare for star drive."

"Sir?" Maxel sat upright, turned.

"You heard me, mister. Fifteen
minutes from—now!"

"Engineering, rig for star drive,"
the captain said quickly.

"Already rigging, sir," engineering
answered. "Orders from the OC in the
admiral's name."

"Very good."

Maxel was not yet confident
enough of his command to resent
Bracer and Roger having given orders
to the crew that was now his.
In fact, he seemed glad of it. But,
given time, Bracer thought, Dan
would have made a damned good
captain. I wish he had that time.

"Miss Cyanta," Bracer snapped,
"open a clear channel for the OC to

Pharsalus and *Cragstone*, and leave it
open for his use only. Then relay
verbally for confirmation that we—
will enter star drive at exactly
15:38:00. We will proceed toward the
enemy squadron. When we are suffi-
ciently close, we will cut pseudo-
speed, drop screens, and open fire
with all weapons on the enemy for
exactly thirty seconds. At the end
of that time screens will be restored,
and we will attempt to escape. *Phar-
salus* and *Cragstone* are to follow
the lead of the *Iwo Jima* until told
otherwise. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Get to it."

Four hours—well, that was out
now. They'd meet the Jillies a hell of a
lot sooner than that. A lot sooner than
even the Jillies expected.

"Engineering to bridge," said the
voice from the command console.

"Maxel here. Go on."

"Rigged for star drive, sir. Planned
entry at 15:38:00."

"Very good," Maxel answered.
"Stand by." Then he turned to look at
Bracer. "Now what?"

"Prepare all weapons systems.
Have weapons crew ready to com-
mence firing on my signal. We will
drop screens for thirty seconds and
throw everything we've got at them."

"But dropping screens, sir, isn't
that . . ."

"For maximum firepower," Bracer
said slowly, remembering what had
had happened the last time he had
ordered screens dropped, how Jillie
missiles had risen from the barren
ground of a world called UR-339-72-
IV, how he had fought to escape them,
and the warship that had planted

them, and how he had failed, and how he had died. "It's standard tactics."

"Yes, sir," Maxel said, with an expression on his face that Bracer could not identify. It might have been fear, or hope, or desperation, or determination. But it did not matter what it was, how Maxel felt inside. He was a good officer. He'd do what he had to do.

Ten minutes to star drive.

"Admiral," said the communications officer, "*Pharsalus* and *Cragstone* confirm and report rigged for star drive—at 15:38:00. They await further orders."

"They've got their orders. Tell them to just follow my lead. Do what I do. Then they'll be on their own. I don't dare tell them anything more. Somebody might be listening."

"Yes, sir."

Five minutes.

"Torpedo bays ready," reported Weapons Control Officer Akin Darbi. "Hold control units for my signal."

"Yes, sir."

Three minutes.

The computer man continued to read off speeds and distances. The Jillies grew closer.

"Miss Cyanta," Bracer said, "get me Breakaway. Quickly."

Moments later he was facing Commander Lasin, Breakaway's communication officer, in the tank.

"Yes, admiral?" Lasin said.

"We've lost transmission from Adrianopolis," Bracer told him.

"Sorry, sir, but we're channeling all available power into the outgoing signal."

"Okay," Bracer said. "Just tell me what's happening there."

"Well, sir, as you requested,

General Crowinsky contacted Admiral Ommart and informed him of the situation here," Lasin said. "He—that is, Admiral Ommart—immediately dispatched a light battle cruiser toward the scene of the battle, with instructions to pick up Admiral Mothershed and his report, and then return them to Adrianopolis at once."

"Has the ship lifted from Adrianopolis?"

"Yes, sir. It made brief contact with Port Abell just a few moments ago. It's accelerating at max pseudospeed out of the system."

"Who's commanding that ship? Do you know?"

"A Captain Jacobsen, I believe, admiral."

"Henri Jacobsen?"

"Yes, sir. I think so."

"He's a good man. When do you estimate he'll reach Mothershed?"

"Three or four hours."

"Can't you pin it down any closer?"

"No, sir. I'm afraid not."

Bracer sighed. "Six to eight hours then for the round trip, if he doesn't have to wait too long to get in to Mothershed and pick him up."

"Yes, sir."

"Dammit, I wish I knew how that battle was going. It could last for hours."

"Yes, sir."

"Keep me posted if you possibly can, commander."

"We will, sir. We'll do our best."

"You'd better, commander, by all that's holy, you'd better."

"I know, sir."

"Good luck, Lasin. Bracer out."

One minute.

"Attention. This is the captain," said the voice of Daniel Maxel over

the ship's intercom. "All hands prepare for star drive in one minute. I repeat. Star drive in one minute."

"Nuclear missiles ready," said Akin Darbi.

Now Absolom Bracer had almost forgotten the pain of his wounds, his missing limbs, the organs he no longer had. But it was still there, all of it. He supposed that it would still be there when . . . when it ended. So be it. The pain wasn't really that bad. You can get used to anything if you have to.

Thirty seconds.

"Energy cannon crews at stations."

Fifteen seconds.

"Star drive potential achieved. Holding."

Then.

Now.

NOW!

How do you describe the entry into star drive? Words just aren't adequate. Only mathematics can describe the motionless motion of micro jumping from the real universe into—what? You can't even talk about it in words. Nor are there words to describe the distortion, the displacement, the unbeing that a man feels when it happens, when the first jump is made. If you've never experienced it, no one can tell you about it. If you have, no one needs to.

It took the tanks a second or two for their scansion to synchronize with their micro jumping. At first they flickered, tried to hold on the half of the "cycle" that represented what we call the real universe, got out of phase, shifted through a mad, meaningless unblack grayness, then settled down, holding on the sync pulses fired from the star drive generators, scan-

ning only when in normal space, cutting out when in nonspace.

The *Iwo Jima* was in one spot. It "twisted." It was in another spot, one hundred and seven kilometers away. It hadn't *moved*. It had just changed location. Hell, I know it doesn't make any sense. But it works. That's all that really matters, isn't it?

Five hundred micro jumps per second. Then a thousand. Then two thousand. The starship was jumping faster than it was moving under true speed. Plasma drive was cut.

The six ship Jillie fleet began to swell in the tanks, loomed larger and larger, distant points of light becoming real, visible objects.

"All hands stand by," Bracer said.

. . . Roger? . . .

. . . They're ready, sir, the other ships. They'll do what you do, when you do it . . .

. . . Okay. Stay with me, Roger . . .

. . . I'm with you, sir . . .

. . . Keep things coordinated as best you can . . .

. . . I will, sir . . .

Still many, many kilometers distant a Jillie energy cannon fired, wild and high. Another cannon blasted, closer this time, but still wide of its mark, and poorly synchronized with the jumping of the human starships. They'll have to do better than that if they expect to do any damage, Bracer thought.

Closer still, a third energy cannon fired, right on sync, striking the *Iwo Jima's* screens, and was absorbed.

Now the fun begins.

The starships angled slightly, aimed for a gap between the six enemies.

Three thousand microjumps per second.

The space was narrowing at fantastic speed. The Jillies now could have been seen with the naked eye, had someone been in a position to observe them. Now it was time.

"Cut star drive! Drop screens!" Bracer yelled. "Thirty seconds of continuous fire!"

There was a sudden lurching sensation as the pseudospeed generators cut off, as the *Iwo Jima* ceased its motionless plunge through space, "stopped," hung scant kilometers from the decelerating enemy.

From within the starship no one could detect the instantaneous absence of the force screens that had enfolded her, that had deflected and absorbed electromagnetic energy. But now they were gone, and the ship's hull was naked again to the light of Breakaway's sun, and to the weapons of the enemy if they were able to use them quickly enough.

Almost simultaneously, the ship's twenty-one energy cannon began to fire, lacing the darkness with intense beams of force. Most of them picked the nearest of the enemy warships, a medium battle cruiser, bathing it in heat and light, pouring uncounted ergs into the energy absorption units of its field generators.

Fifteen nuclear tipped missiles exploded from launching tubes, electronically sighting in on the enemy craft, bearing toward them on tails of flame.

The six plasma torpedo tubes glowed white as spheres of the "fourth state of matter" burst from them into space, enfolded in magnetic cocoons, propelled by their own

intense power, ballistically guided since no external signals could possibly penetrate the layers of stripped matter to the control unit nestled in the center of that raging hell.

As legions of fury broke from the *Iwo Jima* and the *Pharsalus*, the enemy began to realize what was being done to them, began to decelerate and turn, to face the unexpected and inexplicable attack. But even as they turned, the nearest Jillie ship faltered; its screens grew brighter as heavier and heavier loads of energy splashed against them. Absorption units within the alien began to break down, exploding, creating havoc within the ship's metallic skin. As more units ruptured, the field began to flicker—a nuclear missile, entering the field, exploded; now more energy than the alien could withstand—her shields collapsed, matter/energy fell inward onto the ship; her hull red, white, then did not exist. A tiny sun flashed in space, an artificial nova. The Jillie ship exploded.

A cheer went up from the officers and the crewmen on the bridge of the *Iwo Jima*. One down . . .

Then the thirty seconds were up. Daniel Maxel reacted.

"Weapons, cease firing! Engineering, screen up!"

"Get us out of here!" Bracer added. "Star drive, now!"

The two or three second delay was agonizing. The remaining Jillie ships had negotiated their turn, were coming back now toward the three immobilized starships, their own mobilized starships, their own weapons now lighting the blackness of space.

. . . Roger, are they with us? . . .
. . . They are, sir. Right on the
money . . .

. . . Are they ready to go? . . .
. . . Ready . . .

"Bridge, this is engineering. Star
drive at potential, standing by."

"Let's go," Bracer said. "Max-
imum."

Again the distortion, the disorien-
tation of star drive. The ships began
to "move" again, in and out of reality

"Get those cycles up," Maxel said
looking at the console. "They're closing."

"Doing the best we can, sir,"
engineering replied.

"Think they'll know what we're
trying to do?" Maxel asked the ad-
miral over his shoulder.

"I doubt that they understand us
any better than we do them," Bracer
replied. "But they're not going to let
us get away—and they won't give up
Breakaway Station either."

"You figure they'll split their
forces?"

"Wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I would," Maxel said. "But
I'm not a Jillie."

"I'm not one either, but it looks like
about the only thing they can do. I
just hope they think we're worthy of
their big guns."

XXVIII

The starships micro jumped faster
and faster. The cycles mounted. They
moved away from the still sub-light
Jillies, out and away from
Breakaway, toward the outer planets
of the system. The *Iwo* leading,
Pharsalus and *Rudolph Cragstone*
close behind.

Bracer watched the dwindling

Jillie fleet in the tank. They had not
yet acted, though they had ceased
firing as the human ships moved out of
the range of their weapons.

"What are they going to do?" Maxel
asked.

"Watch them," Bracer replied.

One of the alien warships, no more
than a blip now, began to turn about,
aim back toward Breakaway, while
the other four flickered, became
unreal, ghosts, and began to move.

"Here they come," Bracer said.
"Contact Breakaway," he yelled to his
comm officer.

"Yes, sir."

"The heavy's going to hit
Breakaway," Maxel said. "Can she
take it?"

"I don't know," Bracer replied. "I
hope so."

Now the tank in the command con-
sole had come to life, showing the face
of Commander Lasin.

"Get Crowinsky on at once," Bracer
ordered.

"Yes, sir," the stricken com-
munications officer on Breakaway
answered.

It was only moments before his im-
age was replaced by the general's, an
image that flickered with each micro
jump, an image that threatened to
fade out altogether as the *Iwo Jima*
neared lightspeed.

"Jillie heavy battle cruiser coming
your way," Bracer said. "Can you
handle it?"

For a moment Crowinsky did not
answer, his mouth working, his face
white.

"Dammit, man, answer me!"

"I don't know."

"Can you hold him off?"

Crowinsky licked his lips. "For a

while, perhaps. We've still got a few missiles and cannon."

"They'll probably try nukes first," Bracer said. "Get your antimissiles up and try to stop them. If you do, they'll come in closer with torpedos and cannon and try to knock down your defenses. Watch for them."

"I know how they fight," Crowinsky said defensively. "I've seen them before."

"Okay, do your best. We'll hold off the others for a while, but I doubt that we'll be much help against that one."

"I know."

"Good luck, general. We'll be back in touch with you as soon as we can."

XXIX

The starships moved outward.

The rate at which the cycles of pseudospeed increased seemed much slower than it really was, yet, the three human starships were moving away from Breakaway at velocities that soon became multiples of light. UR-712-16 shrank behind them, and the dwindling point of light that was Breakaway had finally vanished from the sky. Radio contact with the station had become impossible.

Chronometers swept around their dials, indicating the passage of time, indicating that the lone Jillie warship that had headed toward Breakaway Station had probably now reached its destination, had begun bombarding the planet with nuclear missiles.

Bracer could be relatively certain of that: the Jillie had reached Breakaway. Of nothing else could he be certain. He could only hope, he could believe that Crowinsky had put

his every defense into operation, and was holding off his attacker. He *had* to believe that, or else the rest was pointless, useless. Crowinsky *was* holding.

The rest of the Jillie squadron went starward, chasing the fleeing humans.

XXX

"Engineering to bridge," said a voice from the command console.

"This is Maxel. Go ahead."

"Pseudospeed generator three is showing signs of overheating, captain."

"How badly?" Maxel asked.

"Not too bad yet, sir," the engineering officer replied. "But it could be if we keep this up for long. *Iwo* isn't in shape to be pushed this hard, sir."

"Watch it closely, but maintain acceleration."

"We'll do our best, sir."

"Keep me informed," Maxel said, turning away from the communicator and looking at Bracer with a questioning expression on his face.

"A while longer, Dan," he said, "just a little while longer. We've got to take them as far as they'll go."

Bracer looked up at the tank that showed the rearward view, the four tiny specks of light that were slowly closing on the battered human ships. They won't stay with us much longer, he thought. A little more of this and they'll decide that they've wasted enough time, and then they'll turn back toward Breakaway. The only way we can prevent that is to stop and fight—and even that won't prevent it for very long.

The chronometer had now ticked away three and a half hours since the brief battle off Breakaway. Commander Lasin said that it would take at least six hours, perhaps eight, for the rescue ship Ommart had sent to get to the scene of Mothershed's battle, pick up the admiral and his reports, and then return them to Adrianopolis for transmission to Earth—six hours if the rescue ship could get in to Mothershed at once, if it did not have to join the battle with the Jillies in order to pick up the admiral and his reports. Six hours, maybe eight hours, maybe more, and then time to send the reports. But how much time was really needed was anybody's guess. There was no way to know. So, drag it out as long as possible—but that wasn't going to be very much longer.

"Mr. Darbi, are all weapons stations ready?" he asked aloud.

"Ready, sir," the weapons control officer said.

"Very good. Miss Cyanta, raise the *Pharsalus* and *Cragstone*."

So little time, Bracer thought, so very little time left. And this time you know you're going to die. This is it.

For a moment Absolom Bracer wondered what his life had been good for, why it had been worth all the trouble. It had been good for a lot of things, he supposed. He had done most of what he had set out to do, and, all in all, it hadn't been a bad life. He had rather enjoyed it. Oh, of course, he thought, there had been a few things he had missed. Like his last visit to Earth. And there had been a time once when he had hoped to see the end of the war,

had hoped to settle down and marry—who?—and raise a family, but he hadn't thought about that sort of thing for a long time. A man with his sexual organs burned away dozens of light-years from his home planet shouldn't think about things like that.

But he had wanted to be a starship captain, and he had made it. And later he had wanted to be an admiral, and he had made that too, though he had never had an opportunity to wear his gold braid in a Terran officers' club. But how important was that?

Yes, Absolom Bracer thought, it's been a pretty good life, all in all. I don't regret it.

"Captains Medawar and Bugioli are on, sir," Eday Cyanta said.

She would have made a man a good wife if she had ever had the chance, Bracer thought, looking at his communications officer. Dammit to hell!

"Very good," he said aloud. "Dan."

"Yes, sir?"

"Come in on this."

The images of the two starship captains appeared on the divided tank.

Quickly, to cover up his own uncertainty, Bracer began to speak. "They're going to get tired of this soon and head back toward Breakaway. We've got to delay that. So, we'll split up. We've held this formation too long as it is. The *Iwo* will angle off to the right 30. *Pharsalus* will do the same to the left. We will maintain our present acceleration for another fifteen minutes. Then we will cease accelerating, but maintain the speed we have reached at that time. This will give the Jillies a chance to catch up with us."

Zoe Medawar's face, of course, showed no expression; Lena Bugioli's little more.

"Captain Medawar," he went on, "we must assume that the Jillies still don't know what you are. They will have to assume that you are a very large warship—and will act accordingly. We have one heavy battle cruiser and three mediums. I would guess that they'll take the heavy and a medium after you, and one medium apiece for us."

"Yes, sir."

"Keep your screens up and run when they get close. With any kind of luck at all, the *Iwo* and *Pharsalus* can knock out the mediums and come to help you. So, just hold out as long as you can.

"Okay, good luck to all of you—and thank you."

Without waiting for a reply, Bracer snapped off the communicator of his console.

Goddammit all to hell! He muttered to himself. Why? Why? Why?

XXXI

The three starships angled apart, and then, fifteen minutes later, ceased accelerating. The Jillie warship closed the gap.

XXXII

"Weapons, prepare to fire on sync," Captain Maxel ordered as a single Jillie medium battle cruiser came into range.

Bracer had been right. The Jillies had split their forces just as he had predicted. Funny. Roger was right, of course. The Jillies were rational

beings, of a sort, at least. They had to be. But still, it was odd. We can imagine what they're going to do in a situation like this, when decisions are made on a more or less logical basis, but, well, in the really big things, like whether to make war or not, we can't even *understand* their decisions. Just how rational are they. Well, how rational are *we* when it really counts? How often are the big decisions based on anything that makes sense?

"Prepare to cut star drive," Bracer ordered.

"Engineering, here, sir. Standing by to cut star drive."

"Dan?"

"We're ready."

"Okay. Give them hell," Bracer said. "Cut pseudospeed!"

An instant of disassociation—and the starship was hanging virtually motionless in space.

The Jillie warship flashed by ghostlike.

"Plasma drive, stand by," Captain Maxel said.

"Standing by."

"Fire plasma drive in one minute."

"Plasma drive, one minute."

"All weapons stations, stand by."

"Standing by," Akin Darbi answered.

The Jillie warship turned, came back toward the *Iwo Jima*, came out of star drive less than a hundred kilometers away.

"Weapons fire on sync at my command," Maxel ordered.

"Standing by," Darbi repeated.

"Okay, Dan," Bracer said calmly, much more calmly than he felt.

"Open up!" Bracer snapped.

The *Iwo Jima's* missiles, plasma torpedos and energy cannon began blasting space through momentary, synchronized gaps in the force screens, all her planet-wrecking weaponry aimed toward the enemy medium battle cruiser.

"How long can the *Cragstone* hold out?" Maxel asked as the first nuclear missiles began to explode against the Jillie's screens, as the Jillie began to return their fire.

"Let's don't fool ourselves, Dan," Bracer said slowly as waves of nearly forgotten pain began to wash over his body. "She can't last long—not nearly long enough for us to help her, if we can at all."

The space between the Jillie and the *Iwo* closed slowly, a space laced with the firing of weapons.

She's just a medium, Bracer told himself. We can take her. Can we? a part of his mind asked. In our shape, can we handle even that? Artificial eyes scanning the tanks, Bracer picked out the sphere of the *Cragstone*, now a brightly glowing ball, rich and metallic, as her fields, bounced toward the ship, then away in a fantastic unholy dance.

The chronometer ticked. Time passed. Energy blazed in space. The *Iwo Jima* fired at her opponent, and her opponent fired back.

Bracer scanned the tanks again.

. . . Roger . . .

. . . Yes, admiral . . .

. . . *Cragstone's* in trouble. How much more can she take? . . .

. . . Little more, sir. We've lost all contact with her—with the *Pharsalus* too . . .

Bracer looked back at the tanks,

found the LSS *Pharsalus*. Like the *Cragstone*, she was surrounded by flaming energy, enfolded in hell.

. . . My god, Roger, she can't even fire back . . .

. . . No, sir, she can't. Not any more. Even a momentary weapons gap in the screens would . . .

Space was lighted by an artificial nova, this one brighter even than that of the exploding Jillie ship of—was it hours or ages before? Tanks darkened to avoid overload, but even with the stars blotted out, Absolom Bracer knew what that explosion was. The *Rudoph Cragstone's* screens had failed. The hospital ship was gone.

The chronometer ticked. Somewhere, millions upon millions of kilometers away, Breakaway Station fought for its life, for a few more moments of life, and while it did it still functioned. Somehow Bracer knew that. The FTL link, the sub-spectrum chain was still whole. For a while.

The *Iwo* closed with her opponent, slammed her with a barrage of nuclear missiles, fell back.

The Jillie retreated, her screens flickering and flaming, a huge, ugly, smoldering gash in her side. A plasma torpedo, under the cover of the nuclear missiles, had apparently slipped through a weapon's gap in the alien screens. The Jillie was hurt. She would fall back now. She would fight no more.

"Dan," Bracer said, "let's go help *Pharsalus*."

Maxel hit the control panel before him, snapping switches as fast as his prosthetic hands would move, yelling orders. "Course correction: pick the medium battle cruiser at one o'clock.

Astrogation: give coordinates. Engineering: give me power. Weapons: stand by for full firepower on my signal."

You're doing a good job, Dan, Bracer thought, but he did not say it aloud.

The plasma drive threw the ship forward at maximum sub-light acceleration, an acceleration so great that it was felt despite the repelling forces of Contra-grav.

"Admiral," Maxel said above the roar that now filled the bridge, "we'll never get to *Pharsalus*."

In the tanks Bracer saw why—the warships that had attacked and destroyed the *Cragstone* were now swinging around, searching for a second target.

"They're coming after us," Bracer said. "Okay, Dan. Let's go meet them."

XXXIII

Seconds dragged by like hours.

Why are we in such a hurry to die? Bracer asked himself. Why don't we turn now, and run. Nobody'd blame us. We've done everything we can to help. Breakaway—we can't do anything more. Now, while we've still got some kind of a chance to get away, why in God's name don't we go?

And he looked at the tanks that showed the gas still glowing debris that had been the *Rudolph Cragstone* and her crew and her twenty thousand "patients." And he knew why he couldn't run. Not now. Not ever.

And after a while the seconds quit dragging by and the Jillie heavy battle cruiser was within firing range.

XXXIV

Absolom Bracer did not know, had no way of knowing, that the light battle cruiser sent from Adrianopolis by Admiral Ommart, the *LSS Messala Corvinus*, had reached the place where Admiral Mothershed and his rescuers fought against the Jillies. Even before the *Corvinus* came out of star drive, the Jillies were falling back, battered by the combined fire from the starships from Port Abell and Mothershed's *San Juan*, *Chicago* and *Hastings*.

The sudden arrival of the *Corvinus* must have frightened the aliens, convinced them that even more aid was coming to Mothershed from the human planets of the Adrianopolis system. Breaking off the engagement, the Jillies that were still able to flee turned about, entered star drive and ran back toward the distant stars from which they had come. The humans let them go.

Contacting the flagship of the small rescue squadron and Admiral Mothershed himself, Captain Jacobsen of the *Corvinus* told them of the danger to Breakaway and the subspectrum chain.

"I'm going to pick up you and your report, sir," Jacobsen told Mothershed, and get you back to Port Abell as quickly as possible. They're standing by to transmit to Adrianopolis, which will relay the message to Earth. Your reports are ready, aren't they, sir?"

"Yes, of course. All on tapes," the admiral who had invaded Jillie-occupied space replied.

"Then please prepare to tranship, sir,"

So the *Corvinus* matched with the *San Juan*, and the admiral and his reports were transferred. And then, while Absolom Bracer still fled and then slowed and turned to fight the last fight, the LSS *Messala Corvinus* headed back toward Port Abell at maximum pseudospeed.

Time was running out, and everyone knew it. Even Absolom Bracer knew it, and he perhaps better than anyone else.

XXXV

. . . How much time do you figure we have now, Roger? . . . This thought was projected with astonishing lack of emotion. Perhaps it had all been used up.

. . . Hard to say, sir. They have far more firepower than we. Several minutes, I'd say, and then we'll have to close our screens . . .

"Ready, Dan?" he asked aloud.

Maxel nodded.

"Okay, let them have all we've got, but don't hesitate to close the screens if it gets too hot."

"Yes, sir."

Closing the screens will also stop our own fire, Bracer thought, but it will give us a few more minutes—that really matters any more.

As Maxel relayed his orders to weapons and engineering, Bracer sought for the image of the *Pharsalus* in the tanks. For a moment he could not find her, and when he did he stopped cold, realizing that his command had now dwindled to only one ship. The *Pharasalus* was dead. A twisted hunk of still glowing metal. She had ruptured, spewing her insides into the vacuum, and Lena Bugioli and all with her had died.

Now the *Pharsalus'* attacker was turning toward the *Iwo Jima*, joining the dog pack that hunted down the last fox.

Back to the main tank: he saw the trails of missiles, the glowing spheres of plasma torpedos escaping through gaps in the screens, blasting toward the two Jillie warships that could now be seen without amplification.

"Screens taking ninth level force," the voice of the engineering officer said from the console. "Absorption units holding."

And a Jillie missile exploded a handful of kilometers away, radiating even more energy into the screens.

A plasma torpedo danced in the grip of magnetic fields on the edge of the *Iwo's* force screens.

A dozen energy cannon beams played across the ship, attempting to break through her dangerously loaded defenses.

"Shall I close screens, sir?" engineering asked.

Maxel looked at Bracer.

The admiral looked at the tanks, saw the second medium cruiser bearing down on them, but still well out of firing range.

"Not yet. Keep firing."

Seconds grew into minutes and still the screens held, still the *Iwo* was able to return the fire of the attackers, but soon, oh, very soon, a third Jillie would begin firing—and Bracer knew that they could not hold off all of them.

The heavy came in closer, jumping forward in a sudden burst of acceleration, heedless of its own safety, or perhaps realizing the *Iwo's* growing weakness, anxious to make the kill.

"Missiles!" the voices of the damage control officer yelled. "Sectors IV, IX and . . ."

"Screens up full!" Maxel yelled. "Close all . . ."

The starship shook, shivered, shuddered, screamed.

. . . Roger . . .

. . . Screen faltering. blast got through. hull breeched . . .

. . . Damage control? . . .

. . . Active . . .

"Admiral," Daniel Maxel yelled, "our underport guns are out."

"Let's get out of here!"

"Missiles at sector . . ."

Metal screamed, lights flickered—darkness fell across the bridge. Somewhere, far off, Absolom Bracer thought that he heard the whistle of escaping air.

"Seal all compartments," he yelled even as the automatic controls began the operation.

The bridgelights came on, flickered back out again. Darkness for two, three seconds.

. . . Absolom . . .

. . . Yes, Roger . . .

. . . Plasma torpedo broke through; aft sections III and IV destroyed. Drive out. Screens going . . .

The *Iwo Jima* was dying. In seconds, or minutes at the most, the screens would fail and the enfolding energy would cascade in, crushing, vaporizing, and it would all be over. And Absolom Bracer would die again.

He knew that his time had come and this time for good, yet now he felt no fear, no pain. He had done what he had set out to do, and that was enough. Call it a hunch, or call

it clairvoyance, call it whatever you like, yet Absolom Bracer somehow knew that they had lasted long enough, somehow knew that the single Jillie warship off Breakaway had not been enough to destroy the station, somehow knew that Admiral Mothershed's report had reached Port Abell and was even then being beamed Earthward. It might have been wishful thinking, a dying man's fantasy, but he didn't think so. It was something more than that; it was a sort of knowledge; and it was a triumph. The report *was* getting through.

Suddenly the ship shook, and through the metal of the deck Bracer could hear a tremendous explosion.

"Roger!" . . . roger! . . .

. . . Absolom, my circuits are damaged . . .

. . . Roger, hang on . . .

. . . I am well, but my communications are going. my eyes . . .

. . . Absolom, I can't see, I can't hear, I . . .

. . . Roger! . . .

For the first time since boarding the *LSS Iwo Jima* Absolom Bracer was alone, really alone.

"Cold-sleep coffins, everybody!" he yelled over the growing roar, he yelled as the artificial gravity of the bridge vanished and weightlessness took control of his clumsy body.

"You too," Dan Maxel yelled.

"No."

"For God's sake, Absolom, save . . ."

The universe exploded in light, heat, flame. Bracer saw the near bulkhead begin to melt, flowing white and then flowing—and then his

prosthetic eyes were burned away as the energy beamed raked the bridge.

But he did not scream as he died, nor did he regret his dying.

XXXVI

The relief ships from Earth arrived three standard days later.

Wreckage orbited Breakaway; wreckage stretched in a line to the very limits of the Breakaway system, and in that wreckage were found the bodies of only seventeen crewmen in cold-sleep coffins, only seventeen who had not died for the last time, only seventeen who could be taken to Earth and given life again.

And one of those seventeen was not actually a body, but a brain in a saline solution, a brain and the machines that kept it alive, now all but insane,

in the ruin that had been the *Iwo Jima*. Roger had said that he was a spaceship, and the spaceship that was his body had died, as had the bodies of all the others. Roger had died again. But he too, that naked brain that still "lived," could be taken back, given sanity again, and another body, another mechanical, starship body. And he again would go out to fight.

Breakaway Station consisted of little more than a series of still glowing craters in the surface of the dun-colored world, craters that would burn with radiation for years to come.

But Admiral Mothershed's report had gotten through—Earth had been informed—and even now her fleets prepared to move into Jillieland, toward the home of the enemy, toward his weak spots—to kill and avenge. The End

Continued from page 9

are in fact the final and most terrible manifestation of the rampant spirit of Materialism in our modern world! This Invasion is the only too expectable outcome of more than thirty years of Welfare State-ism, Trade Unionism, and Appeasement! The Government has abetted the most irresponsible and dangerous elements of Society in actions that have led, step by step, to this fatal outcome and to the death of such a man as Reverend Revelstorke.

Therefore look not to Outer Space in seeking to explain these dreadful occurrences. The guilt lies not there but in the inmost depths of our own hearts! *These 'dinosaurs' have come here from Inner Space!*

Perhaps your readers will find such an outspoken warning 'old-fashioned', but sometimes it is

necessary for a man to speak out. If there is another explanation of these events that can as *satisfactorily* account for all the facts, I have yet to hear it.

In conclusion, I would like to point out that Reverend Revelstorke was not 'eaten' as stated in your account the following day, nor would it be quite honest even to suggest that he was 'attacked' in the usual sense of that word. Rather I believe that the 'dinosaur' as it emerged from the putative 'flying saucer' was completely unaware (because of the darkness, the confusion, and the man's relatively small stature) of anything in its path when it stepped on Reverend Revelstorke with its huge left foot.

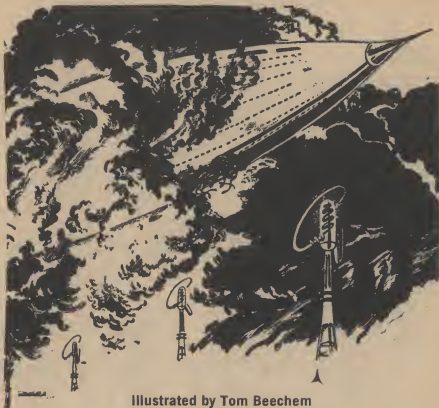
Yours—

In the spirit of Truth,
J. G. Drabble, ret.

ASK A FOOLISH QUESTION

By Milton Lesser





Illustrated by Tom Beechem

The Leader knew what was best for his people. But he missed out on what was best for himself.

He was going to die.

The fear had washed over him hours before. He wondered if it always worked that way, in stages. At first he thought he'd know nothing but fear—wild, unreasoning fear, until the end came. It had ebbed, though. And now, surprisingly, he could smile at the insipid faces of passersby in the best Government-prescribed fashion.

"Greetings, Citizen!"

"Fine weather, Citizen!"

Why don't you drop dead, Citizen . . .

The second stage was curiosity. He was going to die. Obviously. The Government said so. And what they said was always so. It was certainly nice of them to warn him; they didn't warn everyone.

You are going to die (The Govern-

ment man had told him, cheerfully, almost).

We all die.

But you are going to die next week. Monday, fifteen hours.

You're from the Department?

Yes, the Department.

How?

You'll find out. Against the Code to tell you in advance.

I don't want to die.

You'll die.

Must I?

Not in our hands. We merely predict, but we don't make mistakes. Monday, fifteen hours. You'll die.

Now, he wondered what death was like. Not the act of death, but after. Sleep? Hell? Heaven? None of them? Begin again, maybe. Some place else, someone else, a bawling infant once more, with a whole life of sameness ahead of him. It is, he thought, five days to Monday. Shine those gates, St. Peter. Rah. Here comes Jones. If there were a heaven—which he doubted, as much because the Government never mentioned it as for any other reason—then it would be all or nothing. It had to be all or nothing. Either everyone would go there or no one would, for everyone had been moulded in sameness.

Almost everyone.

His name was Gregory Jones. Gregory for his grandfather who had passed the tests and gone to space the year he was born. His mother had given him the name for luck. But he'd failed the tests so far, which wasn't unusual. He had an oval face with close-set eyes and sparse, mousey hair. He was medium height, a little on the stocky side, with

sensuous lips. That's why he'd failed for space.

Over-all emotional attitude: too sensual. Tough luck, Jones. Try again next year. (Snicker—it's hopeless, old man, can't you see that it is?)

He was thirty-one years old and foreman of an assembly gang in one of the factories. After five years, he still did not know what they assembled—merely a squat black box with a lot of intricate stuff inside. You used it on spaceships, or maybe on the Utopia-colonies, wherever they were. Some said Mars, others argued for Venus. Once, a woman had gone around yelling Alpha Centauri and the Government agent had asked her if she'd ever seen Alpha Centauri. Why, no, I read you can only see it far south of here. Then shut your mouth, stupid. If you can't see it, how do you know it exists?

Which, Gregory Jones thought, was kind of foolish, especially since the Government asked you to accept a lot of things you couldn't see. Funniest part of it was, the woman passed her tests that year and spaced out to the Utopia colonies. Alpha Centauri? Now she knew, at any rate.

One, two, three, four, five. Five days to Monday. Quite logically, the third stage was anger. It boiled over, overflowing his curiosity at once, drowning everything else. An unfamiliar redness flooded his face, all the way to the roots of his sparse hair. Something constricted his throat and he almost choked. He reached a pudgy, thick-fingered hand into his pocket, found the crumpled pack of cigs, cursed when

he realized it was empty. He balled it up and threw it toward the curb, savagely. The Government could predict such things as death when it wanted to, but it couldn't keep you supplied with cigs. Excreta on the Government.

"Have one of mine, Citizen Gregory."

"Eh? Thank you." He took the cig, lighted it, realized as he always did that it was at once sour and flat, harsh and bitter. It was nice, however, to roll the smoke in your mouth, provided you could forget the taste.

"I was on my way to visit you, Citizen Diane," he lied.

"Really?"

"Of course." It was an opportunity to forget his troubles, at least for the evening. Only, she'd like it better if the meeting had been more than an accident.

They stood on a street corner, the long rows of barracks effectively blocking the wind which moaned in from the sea this time of year. Twilight had come and gone, and now lights began to wink on in the little oval barracks windows. Gregory realized, with something of a start, that he had indeed come to within a street of where Diane lived.

"Oh, I'm glad you came, Gregory! Yes, oh yes. I'm ready for the tests this year, I'm more ready than I've ever been before."

Always it was the same. She'd said that every year that he could remember, and probably she'd go right on saying it until she became sixty, and hence ineligible for the tests. He generally thought it was funny, but he never laughed. Now he

saw nothing funny in it; nothing could hold any emotional tone except his own predicament, and that wasn't funny. And so he chuckled softly there in the gathering darkness.

"What's the matter? You're laughing at me! I mean it, Gregory. This time I mean it. I can pass the tests and go out to the Utopia colonies. If you think that's funny, after all the years we've planned together . . ."

Instantly, he regretted it. Yes, they had planned for Utopia together although, actually, Diane had done all the planning. He'd merely nodded at the proper times, let her cry on his shoulder, also at the proper times, buoyed her up when she needed it, comforted her, studied with her, cheered her, made love to her.

She was good for that, and so he'd grabbed the opportunity at once. The Government frowned on it, for it was joy but not Government joy. Still, the Government had not yet become ubiquitous, and there were places out in the country where, if you knew the right people—

"I laughed because it's too late for me," Gregory said.

"What do you mean, too late?"

He told her about Monday, fifteen hours. He related it drily, as if it weren't happening to him at all. That was what she'd expect. Her hero. Stalwart, Rock-of-Gibraltar Gregory. And because he told it that way, her sympathy would be all the greater and he'd profit at least by last-minute physical gratification, since he could not profit in any other way.

"It isn't fair." Diane sniffed. Good. "Don't say that. It's not a question of fairness. Even the Government, it isn't the Government's fault. They merely predict, with a hundred per cent accuracy when they decide to do it at all."

"How do they predict?"

"I don't know. Only it never misses. Ordinarily, it would be a question of what you don't know not hurting you. For some reason, Government's seen fit to inform me in advance. Five days."

"Gregory."

"Please. No tears. No pity. I don't need that." For ever and ever, it seemed, he'd played this role with Diane. In his ears, the words he spoke sounded almost ludicrous. Melodramatic, certainly. Well, he'd carry it all the way. Let her search her own soul and find something lacking. "No recriminations, either."

"But—but there were so many times, so *many* times, when we let the opportunity slip through our fingers. Now you have five days. I'll be going to space, Gregory. I know I will. But I'll be going without you, all alone, and space won't be what it could have—"

"Enough. I have five days. I want them to be five days of life." How ridiculous could he get, and still have her believe? Anyway, it did not matter, not really. He'd played the role for so long that now he was not altogether sure that he wanted what she could give him. Perhaps the words formed in his larynx from force of habit. Definitely, they didn't stir him. Had he not met Diane here on the street, it never would have occurred to him to seek her out in the

brief time that remained. Habit. He could call it nothing else. And—

The logical conclusion staggered him.

How long had this been going on? Was he the only one? No, not even in his own experience, for Diane was a creature of habit, too. And Dane Kibberish, sweating, hard-working, moon-faced Dane Kibberish—he was a living, breathing pro-Government habit. Did the Government, then, encourage habit? Suddenly, it seemed so. More than that. Government encouraged habit of any kind! Pro-Government, like Kibberish, that was fine, but Gregory had the feeling they'd accept it either way. Why, they'd politely turn their backs on clandestine meetings, as they'd done for years in his own particular case. He found himself wondering if a scanner had followed him that day near Three Forks, where he'd met Diane behind the weathered old red barn. She'd brought the books and they began to study, but that was her idea, not his, and it didn't last long.

Had someone watched, and laughed—and approved? It was a hell of a time for his mind to insist on logic, yet that was the way it had always worked. First, the Government kept everyone busy but maintained a low standard of living. Naturally. The fruits of ninety per cent of all labor went for two things: either Government itself, or the Utopia colonies. You objected to the former, but it was a necessary evil, like death. You encouraged the latter, for you hoped that yourself, or your children . . .

Second, it seemed that Govern-

ment could predict death at any time, but didn't want to. Result: an occasional prediction, as in his own case, sufficient to keep the people aware of some mighty potent power but not enough to create a neurotic, scared-to-look-in-the-mailbox frenzy.

And third, Government fostered habit. Habit inclined the Citizenry toward laziness, bad think-habits, indifference to hardship (Unless the hardship broke the habit-pattern which, probably, it rarely did), lack of self-discipline and, finally, a dependence on Government, since most of the habits were in the nature of Government orders, although the Citizenry failed to see that.

"Well," said Gregory. "Well, well, well." His abrupt realization, of course, had come too late to do him any good. It did, however, bring a certain amount of satisfaction.

"We can go to the country," Diane told him. "For the whole five days, if you like." Then she brightened. "Say, could that make any difference? I mean, maybe it would alter the pattern or something—"

"No. The pattern's already set. Since it never misses, I'm a dead man."

"Don't say that!"

"I'm a corpse. You're talking to a corpse."

"Don't."

"All right, for you I'll stop. But it's the way I think."

"Don't. We have so little time. I'll take my books out into the country, of course, but I'll only read them in the mornings. Almost, it will be like we're married."

It wasn't the marrying year. Also,

Gregory wasn't the marrying kind, but he failed to say that. She'd have learned in time, had life run its normal course. Now she'd never know.

"I'll call you in the morning," Gregory said.

"The morning? Not now?"

All at once, desire had left him. Habit? He'd broken that habit at least, although the way he'd always felt, it should have been the last one to go. "In the morning," he said. "Rest period."

Five days. He had an awful lot to learn in five days, and he wouldn't miss out on the opportunity.

Later, he ate his stew at the barracks canteen, mouthing quickly the thick soup with its ugly splotches of pink meat. Dane Kibberish sat down near him, speaking endlessly about how his two children would be right for the Utopia colonies. He had an ugly little son, as Gregory remembered, aged three, and a buck-toothed, moronic daughter twice that age.

Gregory did not think of death at all. Five days? Five days could be a lifetime, especially when there was so much to learn.

A new thought, an unbidden thought, entered his mind when he awoke. Why hadn't he bothered wondering *how* he would die? There was death and death. There was the kind that hurt, the kind that lingered, the kind that struck swiftly and without warning. Like Government agents were rumored to strike at night with the quick dark hand of death at subversives! Now, *there* was an odd comparison, Gregory thought as he got into his jumper,

ran a comb through his sparse hair, stepped out into the hall, padded across it with his toothbrush to the community washroom.

Softly but volubly, Gregory cursed himself for a fool. Here he was, gargling with the salty, antiseptic mouthwash, preparing to go to work—with but four days of life remaining. Did his work matter? Did he actually care about it? Certainly not. Habit again. Ironically, he wondered if some hardly guessed-at habit would cause his demise.

"Morning, Citizen!" Dane Kibberish called cheerfully, spitting mouthwash into the trough. It wasn't particularly warm, but sweat beaded Kibberish's forehead and cheeks, running down the moon-face and dripping off the tip of the incongruously long nose. He managed to work up a sweat and bring color to his cheeks, to pant from exertion and mop his brow in earnest, with every little action. At the factory, he merely fastened a clamp to each of the black boxes that rolled down the conveyor, but when the closing whistle blew his jumper would be ringing wet.

"You should see them," Kibberish said, and smiled inanely. "They'll be right for the Utopia colonies. Oh yes, I can see it. The girl is only six, but smart! And the boy—"

"I'm sure," Gregory said. Kibberish made him sick. Kibberish was so typical. It was the Kibberish-type that formed solid bedrock for the Government. Kibberish was a statistic.

"Walk with me to the canteen, Citizen Gregory?"

Gregory sneered. "Don't you read

Govnews? A good Citizen like you?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I didn't have a chance last night. Visiting night at the Under-ten barracks, you know. But I have a copy in my back pocket—ahh! Here we are. What's that got to do with walking down to the canteen?" Kibberish took the folded sheet from his pocket, spread it out over an unused wash basin.

Somehow, Gregory was enjoying himself. "Page three," he said.

Kibberish read aloud, in a shocked voice. "It is the duty of the Department of Prognostication to announce that Citizen Jones-2013-G38 will perish on Monday, the sixth of the month, at fifteen hours precisely. A Section Foreman for several years, Jones has been a good, loyal Citizen. He is unsurvived by relatives."

For a time, Kibberish couldn't speak. He stood there, his tongue clucking foolishly. Then: "My word, Gregory. Oh, oh, oh! You seem so healthy. Oh, yes, you do. But the Department of Prognostication never makes mistakes—"

"It could be violence," Gregory suggested, fighting back a wild urge to laugh. "I could be as healthy as they come, right up to the last minute."

Kibberish bathed his face with a damp handkerchief which failed to sop up the sweat. "I'm sorry, Gregory. Truly sorry. On the other hand, it is nice of the Department to inform you and allow you to put your affairs in order . . ." His voice trailed off lamely.

And that, Gregory knew, was what bothered him more than anything. People died every day, suddenly, unexpectedly. Theoretically,

the Department of Prognostication could have warned them all, but didn't. Why? Why did it single out a certain few individuals for no apparent reason? If you were going to die—well, you were going to die, no two ways about that. But if the Department could somehow foresee it, then a logical assumption was—no, he'd gone over that ground before. Too many frightened people would result, for every visitor, every letter, every call might bring the announcement of doom. Then what remained? The Department liked to strut its stuff, that and nothing more. It was a question of tag, you're it, and Gregory had been tagged. It didn't matter, not really, for death came either way, at precisely the same time. Gregory knew in advance, that was the only significant difference.

"Well," said Gregory, "I guess you'll go on to the canteen yourself."

"Why? Aren't you coming?"

"No. I've decided to skip work today."

"You're not ill, are you? Government frowns on . . ." the voice droned on and on. Kibberish had come down to familiar ground, and it seemed he'd forgotten the Govnews article. We've got to work, work, work. Doesn't Government say this world is a sort of teleology, anyway? Don't they tell you how each year the men and women fortunate enough to merit Utopia are drawn from it? What's the matter with employment, there's no absent-without-leave. There can't be. You shouldn't complain, though, Citizen Gregory. Sure, you work sixty-five hours a week, but doesn't that leave

you plenty of time to read Govnews and Govbooks and hear Govsic? All right, if you're slothful, Government will push from below to keep you in line. But remember this: Utopia will always be pulling from above, skimming off the intellectual and emotional aristocracy for a new and better world. Earth's function is merely to keep that world supplied with everything a Utopia should have, so we've got to work and work and work! And blah, blah, blah. The fat lips blubbered Government dogma effortlessly.

"I'm not going," said Gregory, and went back to his cubicle. He remained in bed a full extra hour. He'd never recalled anyone doing that before, unless he was ill. Certainly, if they had, no one had ever told him.

Then, when it would be rest period at the factory, he went down the hall to one of the public vid-phones, inserted the correct coin (After waiting on line fifteen minutes) and dialed Diane's section of the factory. It always irked him to wait on line like that: it seemed that, all his life, he'd always been waiting on line for something. Well, Government Stat estimated there was one vid-phone for every five-hundred Citizens and, obviously, things had never been that good in pre-Government days. The standard of living was low, he supposed—but vaguely, for the words hardly had any meaning. Hadn't standards of living always been low? Government said so. All such things were relative, it said, but compared with life in the Utopia colonies, the standard was low. Not as low as it had been before Government, but low.

Besides, the standard was low to insure the highest possible standard in the Utopia colonies. And you couldn't argue with that.

Diane's pretty face frowned at him from the screen. It *was* a pretty face, he thought, although lines of age had already etched themselves there. Well, Diane was twenty-six and no youngster. Often, he wished he'd known her ten years before . . .

"Hello, Citizen Gregory."

"I said I'd call you this morning."

"I know what you said, but something's come up, and I'll be leaving work early today. Have the balance of the week off, too. Why don't you call me Sunday night. Then, well, we can get together once for old time's sake before . . ."

Sounds. The words ran together meaninglessly, a jumble of sounds. Could Diane have changed so overnight? No, completely unlikely. Unless—

"Tell me, Diane, has a test schedule been announced?" Government did things like that, allotting no special time each year for the tests. They came up suddenly, without warning, with no time for cramming, and those who passed spaced out to the Utopia colonies soon after that.

"No."

"No? Then what—"

"I didn't say one *wouldn't* be announced."

"Eh? How can anyone tell?"

"Oh, Gregory, I've met the most wonderful man! It happened last night, after you left. I thought it was you all over again in the darkness, because he's built just like you,

almost. But the face is different. He's handsome, Gregory. Oh!—and all the things he knows. Can you imagine it, Gregory, years ago he passed the tests; he could be in the Utopia colonies now, but he decided to remain behind, and—"

"A likely story." Gregory was shocked to find he could feel jealousy four days before death.

Diane stuck her tongue out and made a loud noise with her mouth. "Don't believe me, see if I care. He's going to teach me, Gregory, so I can pass the tests. They're coming soon, he says, and this time I'll be ready."

He didn't remind her that she'd always been ready, three hundred and sixty-five days each year. He said, "Would it be possible for me to meet your friend?" The words surprised him. Why on Earth did he want to meet the man? Probably Diane was lying anyway. On the other hand, could he afford to take the chance? If the man were all that Diane said, if he could indeed foresee the coming of the tests, what other strange knowledge might he possess? Was it entirely within the realm of possibility that he'd also know something of the Department of Prognostication? "Yes," Gregory said, breathing harder now. "I'd like to meet your friend."

Diane was frowning again, but she told him, "Very well. My barracks, in one hour. We won't wait." Her image faded from the screen.

Gregory dressed silently, changing to his finest jumper, the one which he'd received two years ago and which had not faded much because he hardly ever used it. For the first time, it occurred to him that

death might not be inevitable after all. And that made him sweat, like Dane Kibberish, almost. Strange. Fear had come once, only at the beginning and only for a brief moment, and then it had vanished. He'd managed to get by without fear after that, he supposed, because fear indicated anxiety—and if death were the only possibility, there was nothing to be anxious about! But now, now he felt a wild tightness in his chest and an inability to swallow although he wanted very much to swallow. He knew he'd be quite desperately afraid until the end came.

"Citizen Gregory Jones, Citizen Alec Sampter." Diane's two hands clutched Citizen Sampter's elbow as she made the introductions. "Would you believe it?" Diane bubbled. "We met quite by accident. Oh, quite. I feel as if I've known Citizen Alec all my life."

There was an unfamiliar sheen to Citizen Alec's jumper, a gloss to the leather of his shoes. There was also something patronizing about his smile.

"To be sure," he said. He was built like Gregory, medium height, slightly stocky. But his face was gaunt, with the flattest, most expressionless eyes Gregory had ever seen. He had a little mole high up on his left cheek, out of which a tuft of hairs grew. His lips formed the merest slit across the bottom of his face, and when he spoke they hardly seemed to move.

Gregory wanted to say, "I thought you told me he was handsome." But the fear was still with him, lingering at the fringes of consciousness and if

Citizen Alec could somehow—

"Diane tells me you can predict the tests," Gregory said.

"I never said that! Oh, I never said that. He's lying, Citizen Alec. I only said—"

"I don't predict them," Citizen Alec declared. "I simply know when they are coming. Tomorrow and Saturday."

"I thought only the Leader knew that."

"Consider." Citizen Alec smiled condescendingly. "How could the tests be distributed if only the Leader knew? There must be those who prepare the tests, those who print them, those who distribute. If a man fits any one of those categories, he knows."

"Could you tell me—" Gregory began.

But Diane interrupted him. "You said we could study together, Citizen Alec. And there is so little time."

"Yes," Gregory mused. "So little time. If you could answer some questions, Citizen Alec?" He had come here doubting. Still, it had been a straw to grasp. And now that he'd met Citizen Alec, he wasn't so sure. There seemed something about the man, something which made you think, without knowing why you thought it, that if anyone could help you, it was he.

"Suppose I try to satisfy you both," said Citizen Alec. "You gather your books, Diane, and the three of us will drive out into the country."

"Drive?" said Gregory.

"Of course. In my car."

"You have a car?"

Citizen Alec showed them his thinlipped smile. "If one knows of the tests, does it not follow that one has a car?"

Gregory had been in a car once, years ago. A mistake had been made, and Government agents took him in the car to the exterminarium until the error had been rectified. He had very nearly lost his life, and since that time he'd feared the big, noisy vehicles. Most of the Citizenry feared them for no reason at all unless, perhaps, Government made that same mistake with most of them. It crossed Gregory's mind, all at once, that this could be, for he knew many people who came that close to extermination themselves. Did Government, then, attempt to instill fear?

Diane returned to them with an armful of books and the three of them went out to the street. The car was parked around the corner.

Big, sleek, shiny, all of glass and gleaming metal, it awaited them. Gregory had to step down to get inside, but he forgot his fright when he found the seats were far softer than his bed at the barracks. He stared right back at all the Citizens who stood outside gawking at them, and he wondered idly if they thought he belonged.

Then, Citizen Alec started the purring motor, and they whisked away from the curb. Gregory's heart jumped up and began to jiggle his Adam's Apple.

They left Diane pouting in a little wooded clearing with her books, promised to return within a few hours. Then, driving down the dusty road once more, Citizen Alec grinned. "I

really must admit I don't know what sort of questions you have, or that I can answer them." The grin faded. Citizen Alec didn't grin much.

"You know of the tests," said Gregory. "I was wondering what else you might know."

"About what, Citizen?"

"About—about the Department of Prognostication!"

"First let me ask you a question, Citizen. Have they notified you?"

"Yes. Monday, fifteen hours." It had meant nothing when Gregory told Diane. It was an opportunity to get something from her, and so he'd told her. And Kibberish? He'd informed Kibberish to see the man squirm in an awkward position. But with Citizen Alec, somehow, it was different; with Citizen Alec the full horror of the situation enveloped him. "I'm going to die," he said, gagging on the words. "I'm going to die. To die!"

"Of that you can be certain," said Citizen Alec, coldly. "Did you drive out here to cry like that, or did you want to ask me questions?"

"Yes, of course. I want to ask you questions. Do I have to die? Do you know if I have to die?"

"If the Department says so, you'll die."

"And there's nothing I can do? Nothing?"

For some reason, Citizen Alec began to chuckle. It was laughter, at least it sounded like laughter. But it was entirely without mirth.

"What is funny, Citizen Alec?"

"I laugh. Must something be funny?"

"What is funny? I am going to die. Do you think that funny?" Gregory

threatened him with a balled fist.

"No, that is not funny to you. If might be funny to other people."

"To no one. No one should laugh because I am going to die."

"There. I have stopped laughing. Does that make you feel better?"

"Why did you laugh?"

"I have stopped."

"But why did you laugh?"

"I think we had better return to Diane."

"There was a reason. I want to know the reason."

"Oh, really, Citizen Gregory! Had I known you were like this, I would not have suggested you join us."

"I have asked a simple question. Why did you laugh?"

"It is a foolish question. I laughed because I wanted to. Is there a law against laughing? Has the Leader said we cannot laugh?"

"I wouldn't know."

"He hasn't. And there, that's better, Citizen. Compose yourself. If you must know why I was laughing, it is because the Leader has such power. If he decides a man is to die—"

"Decides! I thought Prognostication merely finds out. Decides!"

"It is the same thing."

They were driving down a slight incline. On their right was the forest. On their left only a flimsy fence of wood lay between them and a steep precipice which fell off abruptly to the valley far below.

"It is not the same thing. Tell me, Citizen Alec: what would happen if a man knew he was going to die because the Department of Prognostication had so informed him—and then decided to die in ad-

vance?"

"An interesting question."

"Tell me. Would the man die anyway, assuming he had decided to die in advance, but really wasn't dead at all?"

"I do not understand."

"I am not altogether sure I do."

The fear was beating at Gregory's temples, closing a dull curtain of red in front of his eyes. "Stop the car."

They lurched to a stop. Gregory made a mental note of which dial held the car that way on the incline, unmoving.

Gregory swung his right fist up and felt it smash painfully against Citizen Alec's jaw. *Why am I doing this*, he wondered. *Why?* It all seemed quite impossible. Two of Citizen Alec's teeth tumbled out with a lot of blood and fell in Gregory's lap. He whimpered and brushed them away with his left hand hitting Alec again with his right fist because the man began to yell. After that, he did not yell. He just sat there, his head slumped down, his eyes shut. Blood trickled from the corners of his thin lips.

Gregory opened the door, stepped outside. He found Citizen Alec's registration card in back, with a picture. A good likeness. This he folded into his pocket, then stood there scowling. What now?

If a man died ahead of schedule, wouldn't that be the same thing? Certainly not. Prognostication only predicted, they didn't determine. But why had Citizen Alec been so obscure, so enigmatic? Had he known something that made him laugh like that? It was a foolish question, he'd said. Well then, what

kind of an answer could he expect?

Still—

Citizen Alec decided for him. Citizen Alec stirred groggily, whimpered, but not like Gregory had whimpered when the broken teeth fell in his lap. Citizen Alec rubbed his jaw and then slumped down again. But he was moaning.

Gregory reached in through the window, twisted the dial which held the vehicle unmoving on the hill. It began to roll forward, slowly. Sweating, Gregory trotted alongside it, cramping the wheel to the right.

He jumped back, watched the car gain momentum. It hit the flimsy wooden barrier about thirty yards from him and crashed over the edge of the cliff, making a loud noise. Several seconds later, there was another noise, louder this time, and fearfully, Gregory ran to the edge of the precipice and peered over it. Far below, the vehicle had struck some rocks. It was shattered and broken and flame began to lick greedily from some place underneath it.

Gregory chuckled drily, practising. It sounded almost like Citizen Alec.

The sign said:

FLESHART! FLESH-ART!
FLESH ART!

Features remodeled artfully!

No charge if you aren't satisfied!

Then, in smaller printing:

Government sanction essential.

A bell tinkled as Gregory entered the shop. He wondered if Diane were still sitting in her ridiculous meadow. Perhaps she'd heard the crash. But no, they'd been too far away. Afterwards, Gregory had

slunk to a town two miles down the road, had waited for the puffing, ancient steam-train, had boarded it, giving up a month's supply of travel-coupons. He'd sat in a corner of one of the coaches with his collar turned up and his head hunkered down, and no one had looked at him. He hoped the flames would obscure Citizen Alec's face entirely.

The proprietor of the Fleshart store had a halo of frizzly white hair, a short, blunt nose, a round black hole of a mouth through which he seemed to breathe instead of his nose, for it hung open, revealing half a dozen jagged, yellowed teeth, and the tongue trembled up and down with each rasping breath. He had but one eye, large and watery. The other eye-socket was stuffed with dirty cotton.

"Yes?" The word rasped out sibilantly with one of his labored exhalations.

"My face must be remade entirely," said Gregory. "And you must change my hair. All by nightfall."

"The hair is part of the face, Citizen. By nightfall, eh? Very expensive. Does it matter how I change it?"

"Yes. I want to assume a particular appearance, and it's got to be exact."

"Bad. More expense. You don't look like a Department man."

"I'm not."

"Then you'll not have the money. Good day, young man."

"Wait." Gregory moved into the interior of the shop without an invitation. "You don't make much money here, do you?"

"Enough to live. Just enough to live." The old man twisted idly at some loose cotton in his empty eyesocket. It almost made Gregory sick, but he pretended not to notice.

"A bargain. I'll admit it; I haven't the money now. But—"

"But me no buts. Out!"

"But if you do it and if the job is good I'll *look* like a Department man—and then I'll have money, more money than you ever saw. It's up to you, don't you see? A good job gets me what I want, and it gets you your money."

"Five thousand dollars."

"Five thousand dollars, I don't care. It's entirely up to you."

"I change noses, or cheek structure, or an occasional harelip," the old man mused. "Fifty dollars, a hundred. It's slow. A chance like this—h'mmm. All right, young man—for five thousand dollars."

"If your job lets me pass."

"It will. I assure you, it will."

Trembling, Gregory reached into his pocket for the registration card. "Here's the face," he said, handing the card to the old man.

"Citizen Alec Sampter—" the proprietor began to crackle.

"Forget it!" Gregory cried. "Forget that name."

"Yes, yes, of course. You are to be Alec Sampter." The old man studied the picture carefully. "It would have been far better in color," he mumbled, peering intently at the glossy print. He grunted something unintelligible, placed the picture on a counter, limped toward Gregory and pinched his thick cheeks. "We'll have to remove a lot of this. H'mmm. And the eyes won't be hard. The

hair, so—and . . ."

The fingers which probed his face had a vaguely unwholesome odor. They were dirty, every skin-crack was lined with ancient black dirt. The nails were bitten off close, but the torn cuticles were swollen and dirty. Gregory flinched, fought down an impulse to gag.

"Yes, I think we can get you out of here tonight. You'll have to be careful, naturally. You'll be dizzy and your face will be tender. Vertigo is quite common so soon after. Very likely you'll vomit, and keep on vomiting until it feels your insides are coming out. Cigarette?"

"Please," Gregory croaked hoarsely. He hardly recognized the ancient word for cigs, but the smell of the man and the look of him and what he said had already brought a tight ball of nausea to Gregory's stomach. "Please, no. Can't you start at once?"

Shrugging, the one-eyed man palmed the picture with a greasy hand and motioned for Gregory to follow him past a heavy, filthy curtain.

As he followed his guide within the unknown interior of the shop, reaction hit Gregory with palpable force. I have killed a man, he thought, Killed him. Is there a law against it? I do not know, but never in my experience do I remember one Citizen killing another. He is dead, Citizen Alec Sampter is dead, and that at least is irrevocable. When, in a matter of hours, I shall take Citizen Alec's place, I will announce to the world that it was Citizen Gregory Jones who perished. Sad, for I liked my name. Gregory. Yes,

Gregory, it has a certain ring to it.

So what? Unguessable so whats. Does it mean, then, that because I have terminated myself ahead of schedule (Provided it works) I will not meet the end preordained for me? But how can that be? Prognostication merely predicts. Death itself brings the terms of demise, afterwards. No, that is wrong. All wrong. Death would bring the terms of demise whether or not Prognostication predicted. But why did they predict for me? Ah, why?

"Come, come, Citizen! This way. Yes, stretch yourself out there, and we will begin at once . . ."

Gregory felt the needle grating against bone before he tumbled headlong into a pit of blackness. His last thought was: Are those dirty hands going to touch *my* face?

Cackling, obscenely, the one-eyed man held up a mirror. "It is done; it is truly a work of art."

Gregory blinked, stared at the mirror. After a time, he smiled foolishly.

Citizen Alec Sampter leered back at him.

Gregory twitched his nose. Citizen Alec's nose twitched back at him. Gregory fingered the hair-tufted mole on his left cheek, ran his hands down the gaunt face, stared unblinking at the flat, expressionless eyes which looked back at him. When he spoke he observed that the lips which moved hardly moved at all; the small slit of a mouth simply pursed itself, and sounds issued forth.

"It is quite satisfactory," Gregory-Alec said.

"I know. I know! Ten thousand dollars is indeed a small price."

"Ten? We agreed upon five."

"Did we?" The horrible old man snickered. "I fail to remember."

"Yes, five."

"Well, it is now ten. After you assume your new identity, of course."

"Where is my registration card?" Gregory demanded dully. He needed Citizen Alec's address. Smiling, he took the card, for he realized he'd never looked at the address before this.

The address read: *Transient, City Hostel.*

"I will have ways of keeping track," the old man predicted. "Remember, ten thousand dollars, at your first opportunity."

"We don't even know if Citizen Alec had that much money!" Gregory cried, appalled by the thought of giving up all that money, if indeed it turned out he possessed it.

"H'mmm. You are right, Citizen. We will agree upon a percentage in advance. Fifty per cent of your total wealth in your new identity."

"Fifty per cent?"

"Fifty, yes. For a start."

Suddenly, it was clear. The old man could bleed all the red from his veins. Once the thing started, there would be no stopping it. Like a severed jugular vein—

The one-eyed man patted Gregory's cheek, and exquisite pain lanced deep within him through the nerve-endings. He screamed.

"It is not yet dry, Citizen Gregory. See? See? Somewhat pliable. Careful: for the next several hours,

pressure or a sudden blow could distort your new face. Now, fifty per cent will be the outright payment for my art, and afterwards, we could arrange a small weekly—"

Red blobs of agony filled his head. The Fleshart Proprietor was speaking. The same thing, it was the same as he had said before. A *leech*, a *leech*, *Citizen Gregory—I will be a leech . . .*

". . . say, fifty dollars additional per week if your own income is in excess of one hundred . . ."

More red blobs.

". . . or one hundred if it is in excess of two hundred . . ."

Icy needles jabbing into his burning brain. Why had the man touched his painful cheek?

". . . or all excess if it is more than three hundred . . ."

Gregory's strong hands coiled around the old man's neck.

After he let the lifeless body fall from his grasp he ran, whimpering, into the night.

"Spirits," said Gregory.

The Citizen Bartender shrugged. "If you wish them, I will give you spirits. But you have had more than enough."

Gregory took the glass. The Citizen Bartender took his monthly spirits card, punched another hole in it. It was covered with holes.

Gregory lifted the glass to his thin slit of a mouth, drank. In the mirror behind the bar, Citizen Alec drank. Citizen Alec looked drunk, in his flat, expressionless eyes mostly. The Citizen Bartender wagged his head from side to side, sadly.

"I know," he said. "You have heard about the tests and you are

despondent because you have not prepared."

"The tests? The tests?"

"Tomorrow and Sunday. Yes, the tests."

"More spirits." The small glass would not stand still on the surface of the bar.

"All the holes have now been punched in your spirits card."

"Don't you see, Citizen Fool? Although I have but one card, I am really two Citizens. You may punch all the holes again."

"Go home to your barracks."

"I am a transient."

"To the hostel, then."

"Citizen Fool."

"Stop banging on the bar."

"Citizen Fool!"

"You disturb my patrons."

Gregory slammed both hands down on the surface of the bar. "*Citizen Fool!*"

Something hit him. It made a dull sound, like *splat*. He knew it was the Citizen Bartender Fool who had struck him, full in the jaw with a balled fist, but it was a while before the pain came. When it did, it was like nothing he had ever felt before. The pain started at his jaw and engulfed his face. He screamed and screamed and, clutching his hurt jaw, staggered outside and somehow managed to find the hostel down the street. The Citizen Room Clerk looked at him and laughed and Gregory did not ask why he laughed, but allowed him, instead, to lead the way to Citizen Alec's room.

He threw himself across the bed without removing his shoes, screaming and sobbing until he slept, for the hurt had become a terrible

throbbing. Someone banged on the thin wall and told him to shut up.

There was no pain when he awoke, not even a hangover. It was as if, during the night while he slept his restless sleep, his mind had cornered his body and said, "We will have a lot of work to do together, now that the act is accomplished. We can neither of us falter and, therefore, you do not hurt."

He dressed methodically, first exploring Citizen Alec's closet and finding several outfits of lustrous, expensive raiment. Citizen Alec, then, had been a Department man and, briefly, it crossed Gregory's mind that he might not be able to fill the dead Citizen's position. Well, time enough to see about that later. Now it did not matter, not when Gregory himself might be dead on Monday. The thought of that, he realized, increased the flow from his adrenal glands and forced his heart to work faster, but aside from that it failed to disturb him.

Gregory rubbed his cheek, felt the thick stubble, chuckled when he found that Citizen Alec had a thick beard. Well, he'd shave it. He walked into the bathroom, found neither razor nor brush nor cream. But there was a bottle of some almost colorless liquid which bore the label: DON'T SHAVE! and under it, in smaller letters, *depilatory*. Gregory had heard about this liquid which negated the need for razor-blades and scraped faces, and he knew it had been reserved strictly for Department men. It went with Citizen Alec's good clothing and his car, too, and Gregory had a slight spasm of fear. Could he hope to fill

the dead Citizen's position?

He unscrewed the bottle's cover, adjusted the swivel mirror and screamed. He clutched the sink for support, felt the small cubicle of a bathroom spinning wildly. He shut his eyes tight, then opened them again, staring at his new features in the mirror.

He had a lopsided face.

Did that explain the Citizen Room Clerk's laughter? It wasn't terribly lopsided, but the left side of the jaw was decidedly askew, slanting that side of the slit-mouth down perhaps ten or fifteen degrees, drawing the lower lip down and baring the teeth. Citizen Gregory-Alex had a perpetual leer. He composed himself, considered the defect with an objectivity that almost startled him. The Citizen Bartender was responsible, of course; his flailing fist had twisted the face before it had set properly.

Fine. Oh, that was wonderful. He couldn't go back to the store for repairs: the Fleshart proprietor was dead. There, at least, he felt no remorse, for he knew it had been the only alternative. So he had a lopsided face. It was his, his face, and of necessity he'd live with it. Well, hadn't he been in an accident? One man perished when the car leaped the roadbarrier and tumbled over the cliff, and certainly another man would be lucky to escape with a dislocated jaw. Still, careful Government investigation might terminate his masquerade almost before it started. No, that didn't seem inevitable. He recalled that the Fleshart sign proclaimed the necessity for Government sanction,

yet the ugly one-eyed man had never broached the question. Government was not and could not hope to be ubiquitous.

The lopsided face, Gregory decided, might be the least of his worries.

He used the depilatory, then went downstairs to a public vidphone. He got information, called the Department of Fatalities.

"I wish to report an accident," he said, as the face of a young woman appeared.

"Sub-division?"

"Eh? Oh, highway."

"One moment." The woman's voice faded and another one, perhaps ten years older and decidedly unpretty, took its place.

"Yes?"

"I wish to report a highway accident."

"Sixty miles north of the city? We already know."

"Oh."

"A sad thing. Citizen Alec Sampter was killed instantly, charred beyond recognition."

"NO!" Gregory hadn't meant to yell, but it came out that way. "That's all wrong, all wrong. Citizen Alec Sampter still lives. I am Citizen Sampter. Look at me. See?"

"The car was registered under the name of a Citizen Alec Sampter." There was a stubborn edge to the woman's voice, as if she couldn't defile her records with an erasure.

"You'd better check with Identification," Gregory suggested.

There was a pause, then something flared brightly in the vidscreen. "I've taken your picture," the woman said. "We will call you in a moment."

Gregory watched the screen go dark, waited. Would someone notice the lopsided face?

The screen flared up again, and the woman was scowling. "You're Citizen Sampter, all right. But who died in the wreck?"

Gregory's tongue flicked out, licking his thin lips. "Citizen Gregory Jones," he said. "Jones-2013-G38."

"H'mmm." The woman was busy checking a long list of names; Gregory could see her running a bluntnailed index finger over it. "No one has reported Jones-2013-G38 missing."

Almost, Gregory said that was natural, because Jones lived alone, and no one would miss him, at least not for some time. But he caught himself in time, told the woman: "I know nothing about that. All I know is this: Jones died in that wreck."

"How do you know?"

"Well, we were out in the country. Jones didn't know how to drive, wanted to borrow my car and try. I told him not to, we struggled, I fell—hurt my jaw pretty bad, too. When I looked up, Jones was in the car, the car was out of control—and Jones went over the cliff with it. Nasty business."

"I'll say. You didn't report it sooner?"

"No. No, I was injured and I must admit I—I had a few drinks too many. Had to be assisted to my room by the Citizen Clerk. I guess I should have remained there at the scene of the accident, but frankly, young lady—" satisfied, he watched a smile light up the homely, middleaged face—"frankly, I was unnerved. I returned to the city by train and

took those drinks . . .”

“I understand, sir. Yes, sir. I understand. I—what?” Evidently, someone behind her had spoken to the woman, for she turned around, and Gregory had time to see a startled look crawl over her face. Presently she turned to the screen again, more than a little agitated.

“Sir, we’re making an appointment for you with the Department of Prognostication.”

“Prognostication?” Gregory’s pulses raced furiously. “Why is that?”

“The dead Citizen, Jones-2013-G38—his name was underlined in red. That means Prognostication’s random sampling found him, discovered he would die at such and such a time, and reported it. The difficulty is, sir, he was supposed to die on Monday. Monday, sir. That’s considerably in the future. Oh, yes, Prognostication will want to see you.”

“When?” demanded Gregory. As long as he kept his head, he still had nothing to worry about.

“The appointment is coming through—ahh, here we are! You are to see a Citizen Tollotson, Department of Prognostication Building, at fourteen hours, Monday. Merely a routine check, sir. You can rest easy till Monday.”

The screen went dark. He could rest easy, she’d said—except that Monday, fifteen hours, he was scheduled to die. His masquerade suddenly seemed quite ridiculous. How could the fact that he’d altered his identity help him? If certain unknown factors in his life indicated death on Monday, and if Pro-

gnostication declared it was inevitable—then didn’t it follow that all the skullduggery in the world wouldn’t help him? Anyway, he could not continue the ruse indefinitely. The woman had called him “sir” and not Citizen. True, she hadn’t done that until he’d made allusions to her youth, but still, his clothing was clearly that of a man of some Departmental importance. On that account, if for no other reason, Gregory would soon trip himself up.

Except that it didn’t matter. He’d be dead first. He laughed harshly. He might even drop dead on Monday in Citizen Tollotson’s office, provided the interview lasted long enough.

An hour later, he knew the tests had come. Not knowing what Citizen Alec would do with his time and not knowing how to find out, he walked the streets with a casual idleness which he found exhilarating. Not in all his life had he been able to do this. Always there was work, always something to do. Not now. Now there was nothing.

The streets were crowded, and the crisp afternoon sunshine made everything pleasant. As a matter of fact, Gregory thought wryly, the only thing that spoiled the situation was the Citizens. They looked hungry, unhappy, lonely even in crowds, mean, coarse, completely unappealing. Unsavory, almost.

Today, however, Gregory sensed a difference, an urgency. The Citizenry, collectively, was in a hurry. Each individual seemed to walk with his head down, his body tilted forward from the base of the spine, as if fighting a strong wind.

Gregory stopped one of them, a small, thin man with a bald head and shifty eyes. "What's the hurry, Citizen?"

"Here, let me go. The tests. The tests. I've got to enroll."

"What? And have they started already?"

The man freed his arm, scowled. "Naturally, naturally. Provided you enrolled at six hours this morning, when the announcement came. Here, Citizen, let me go." And the man fought his way down the street against a wind which did not exist.

Gregory smiled. Well, why not? At least it would give him something to do. He'd come close last time, that had been the verdict of the Department of Tests. He could just picture Diane's face if he made it this time . . . What's the matter with me? he thought. He could picture Diane's face, indeed. If he made it, he would still be Alec Sampter, not Gregory Jones. Diane might learn that he, Alec, made it—but of Gregory she must learn nothing. And Diane, Diane herself would stand a good chance this year.

Following the earnest crowd, Gregory passed the shining white facade of the Department of Prognostication Building. Day after tomorrow, he'd enter it, seek out Citizen Tolotson. He'd glide silently along the moving corridors, like any one of a thousand Citizens on routine business, but he'd be an hour away from death. Maybe. And quite at once, it struck him as odd that the Department Buildings *did* have moving corridors, clean, shining walls, air-conditioning—while the barracks were bare beyond austeri-

ty. Careful, Gregory, you must never doubt. As an inconsequential Citizen you could do it and get away with it, too, for no one cared. But as Citizen Alec Sampter—who worked in one Department or another, obviously, have care. Besides, the Departments functioned for the good of the Citizens. More important than that, what did austerity matter as long as a chosen few each year could embark for the Utopia colonies? Each man was an equal. Anyone might go, as long as he passed the tests. Often, Gregory wondered about the Utopia colonies. His most secret heart-of-hearts located them on the planet Mars, but he never told anyone. There a man could get all the food he wanted, good food, with plenty of palate-tingling variety, and all the drink, and he was comfortably warm by winter, cool by summer. He worked a little and played mostly, and all menial tasks were done for him.

Yes, thought Gregory, he would pass the tests. Then, if he lived beyond Monday, he'd space out to the Utopia colonies, where a man could start life anew, where the masquerade wouldn't matter. And, if Diane made it too, he might have Diane as well for, as was the girl's way, she had a quick new passion for Citizen Alec Sampter.

"Diane!"

"Cit-citizen Alec!" The girl's face turned white.

Crowds buffeted them here on the fifteenth floor in the Department of Tests Building. People hopped off the moving corridor, timidly entered the cubbies provided for them. Gregory had just now reached floor fifteen, where those whose names

began with the letter S registered. Diane? Naturally he'd meet Diane here. Her last name was Sanders.

"What happened to your face?"

Gregory fingered his lopsided jaw. "Nothing much, really. An accident—"

"And your voice. Your voice sounds—peculiar. Familiar, almost—but different. Are you all right. Citizen? I'm angry, you know. You didn't help me with my studies, and—"

"I'm sorry," said Gregory, trying to imitate Citizen Alec's voice.

"Well," Diane pouted, "you didn't have to go off like that yesterday. Did that nasty Citizen Gregory turn your head or something?"

So now he was nasty. Diane had found someone she thought could help her with the tests, had found Alec who now was dead, and thus snubbed Gregory, who now was Alec. "Don't speak that way of the dead," Gregory told her severely.

"The what? The dead?"

"The dead. Your friend Citizen Gregory drove my car off a cliff and killed himself. Horrible accident."

"What? When, where . . . ?" Diane looked bewildered, commenced to sniffle.

Enjoying himself—he never thought he'd enjoy talking about his own demise—Gregory explained. When he finished, Diane looked almost sick.

"Gregory and I, we—Gregory and I were, well, we used to—oh, Alec!" And she nestled against his shoulder, wailing. Citizens turned to watch, and some of them snickered, figuring no doubt, that for some reason she'd been denied registra-

tion.

Gregory patted her hair. "The tests, my dear," he said softly. "You must compose yourself for the tests. They won't wait for you, and if you're not at your best—"

That worked wonders. Diane knuckled her eyes, small-girl fashion, and smiled. "You're right, Citizen Alec. And now, now I need you. Oh yes, Citizen, I do. I know I'm shameless to say it like this, but I need you."

"I understand," Gregory said. "Don't you worry, my dear." (Would Citizen Alec talk like that he wondered?) "Don't you worry at all. I'm registering too, and if we're both lucky, we'll space out for Utopia together. We'll enter the colonies together. We'll enjoy them together, if you'd like."

Diane stopped her sniffing. "You're so confident, Alec. I wish I could be like that, I wish I could feel so sure of myself. But I, well, I leaned on poor Gregory. Yes, I did. Oh, I did! I realize it now. And would you still say all this if you thought, well, if you thought I'd lean on you, too?"

Gregory winked at her, realized Alec wouldn't have done that at all, then shrugged it off. He was learning his role all the time, and right now Diane was too upset to realize anything. "You try it sometime," he told her. "I'm strong. You will probably find that I am a lot stronger than your Citizen Gregory, my dear."

"Oh, Alec!" She kissed him briefly, hardly more than pecking at his lips, and then she turned to enter one of the cubbies. "I'll see you after

registration," she said.

As Gregory, he realized, she had used him, but as Alec it would be different. He entered one of the cubbies himself, chuckling. But the smile left his face when he thought of Monday.

The most astounding thing about the tests, Gregory decided when he awoke on Monday morning and found the day cool and clear, was that Dane Kibberish had passed them.

Diane had won her birthright to Utopia, and so had Gregory, as Citizen Alec Sampter. He'd have been shocked had it gone otherwise. The tests had seemed easy. Each year, as far back as he could remember, they'd become simpler. The segment of society which won its way to Utopia, however, remained one five-thousandth, which was as he had always remembered it. That might indicate, then, that the Citizenry lost some of its intelligence with each passing year.

But Kibberish! Kibberish had passed. Gregory had seen him, Sunday evening, when the list was read in public. At first, the moon-faced man had stood there, too stunned to react. And when he did, when he finally did, Gregory remembered, he had cried. The tears had streamed down his fat cheeks uncontrollably, and he had cried: "It ain't right for me to go—no, not me. My kids, I'll have to leave them and it'll be years before they can space out too. Well, I'll be in the Utopia colonies to receive them one fine day, just you wait and see." He'd spoken to no one, to everyone.

Kibberish. Had Gregory been asked to name one man who would not

stand a chance in the complex mental-emotional-physical exams, that man would have been Kibberish. It simply did not make sense.

And then, from all directions had come the joyous Citizens whose names had been read, laughing, screaming, crying, thumping one another on the back. There'd been speech-making, drinking, singing, dancing in the streets. And through it all, Gregory could not help watching the disconsolate majority trudging off sadly, returning to their barracks, their beds and their books—ready to try again when the testing returned.

Diane had been radiant, if somewhat hysterical. She'd jumped at him, shouted his name, laughed, cried, clawed him almost. "We're going. You and I, Alec, we're spacing out to Utopia. Oh, Alec, I knew something like this would happen. I knew we'd go, but if I somehow hadn't met you, well, I'd have gone alone and it wouldn't have been the same. Now I won't be able to work, I just won't be able, that's all. I'll be on edge until they let us know when we're going and I only hope it's soon. Alec, will they tell us what clothing we'll need? I mean, if it's Venus it will be warm, I think, but if it's Mars, well—"

"Don't worry," Gregory had said. "Everything will be waiting for us at the Utopia colonies, so we take nothing."

"But when, Alec? When?"

"Hard to say. Last year it was a full week after the tests, the year before, only a day or two. They'll announce it, my dear, and you can relax until they do."

That was yesterday, that was last night. But today, today was Monday. Death-day for Citizen Gregory Jones, although Citizen Gregory Jones already was listed as dead. Still, Gregory thought, with fear creeping back into his brain from where it had waited at the fringes of consciousness, you couldn't fool an inexorable pattern. And that pattern had said Gregory Jones must perish, at fifteen hours, on Monday.

Am I going to die, he wondered over and over. It is now nine hours, and will something happen at fifteen hours which will still my heart forever? But what can happen? I feel fine, I've never felt better. I have a lopsided face, but outside of that, I'm healthy. Yes, healthy. And I will be careful, although I don't have to worry about it, not until fifteen hours. But when the time comes, will what I do matter? What can have any consequence, aside from the grim fact itself: I'm going to die.

If he died in the office of Citizen Tollotson of the Department of Prognostication, would the Citizen suspect his masquerade? Gregory chuckled softly. What was the difference? After he perished, if he perished, let them think what they wanted. On the other hand, why did Citizen Tollotson want to see him? Would there be some penalty for bringing death to a Citizen earlier than the Department had predicted? But that was ridiculous, for Gregory-Alec hadn't been responsible for Alec-Gregory's death, not according to his story, and he saw no reason for anyone to doubt his story.

Then why did Citizen Tollotson want to see him?

At fourteen hours, Gregory entered the Department of Prognostication Building. It was not one of the larger Government buildings, but it had a certain charm. Here curving, graceful lines had been substituted for the harsh, rectangular lines of the other Government structures, and even the inscription above the entrance was in a sort of curving, delicate lettering:

GOVERNMENT IS OMNIPO-
TENT! PROGNOSTICATION
SEES THE FUTURE!

Claims to omnipotence could not be made, Gregory supposed, unless the future was included. The Department of Prognostication filled the breach for Government, viewing the future and predicting it upon occasion. And now, for the first time in his life, Gregory wondered. How could they do this? How, indeed? He smiled at his reflection in a highly polished wall. He doubted only because he wanted to doubt, only because doubting gave strength to his limbs when, if Prognostication were right, he stood one hour from death.

Pale and weak, Gregory reached the information desk. His mouth was dry, his palms clammy. His voice barely rose above a croaking whisper. "I have an appointment."

"With whom?" the woman demanded, doodling on a scratch-pad with her pencil.

"Citizen Tollotson."

"Name?"

"Gre—Alec Sampter!" *Careful, fool.*

"Oh, yes, Citizen Sampter." The

woman had checked her list. "Fourth floor, room eight."

And moments later Gregory told himself, "So here I am. If Citizen Tollotson's business is involved, if Citizen Tollotson is long-winded, I probably will die in his office. Death—to be not. Or, to not be. Now, I wonder, is there a difference? Is it one of those or both or neither . . ."

Someone bumped him, coming out of the office. Gregory had expected a building filled with statisticians, small, bent men, myopic, very bookish. The man who came out wore Department of Prognostication purple, but he was huge, a head taller than Gregory, quite broad across the shoulders, thick-thewed. He had a face carved from old granite, and he wore some unknown weapon at his waist. Prognostication? Gregory didn't get it.

He entered the waiting room, sat down. There were three plush chairs, a window with a good view of the central plaza of the city, a desk, a receptionist talking into an autotype machine. The receptionist did not bother to look up. On the wall over her desk a clock faced Gregory, the red hand sweeping across the seconds inexorably.

Fourteen hours, fifteen minutes.

There was a door at the far end of the room bearing the simple legend: *Manager*. Citizen Tollotson, then, was in charge of Prognostication. For the hundredth time, Gregory thought: why does he want to see me? The question had a double urgency now. First, Gregory could expect forty-five minutes more of life. He'd come to accept that. Almost, there was a masochistic

drive within him to see those forty-five minutes hurry by. What would a man do with the last forty-five minutes of his life anyway? More than anything, Gregory had to know. The forty-five minutes were meaningless: he did not want them. Let them pass; let them take his life with them if they must, but let them pass.

And second, Citizen Tollotson was the manager. Not a minor official, pompous with imagined importance, but the manager. The living Gregory had seen the dead Gregory die, and that the living Gregory was Alec Sampter to Prognostication and to everyone else did not matter. *Someone* had seen Gregory die and he had died ahead of schedule. That called for a meeting with the manager of Prognostication. But why?

At fourteen hours, twenty-two minutes, Gregory began to sweat.

The room was cool, pleasantly airconditioned he supposed. Still, he sweated. The slick material of his jumper did not readily absorb water, and he could feel the sticky dampness all over his body. Streams of perspiration from his armpits tickled his sides and he wanted to scratch them, to disperse them by rubbing the material of his jumper against them. He didn't. Any movement brought a rapid fluttering to his heart and a crazy thought twisted through his mind: *You're so frightened, you're liable to die of fright. Relax . . .*

"Citizen Sampter!"

"Oh! Eh? What?" A terrible sticking pain clutched at the left side of his chest.

"I'm sorry if I startled you, Citizen Sampter. Manager Tollotson will see you now."

"Thank you," said Gregory, and stood up. If he leaned forward slightly, that eased the pain some. As he walked into the manager's office he took one look more at the wall clock. Fourteen:thirty.

"Sit down," Manager Tollotson told him. "You look sick."

"I'll be all right," Gregory mumbled. The worst of the pain had passed, and as had happened so many times before, fright left him quickly. By the time he settled himself and faced the manager, he felt almost normal.

"Cig?" Tollotson offered a box, and Gregory selected one. It had an unfamiliar, delicious fragrance, and when he'd lighted it and inhaled, he realized it was the best he'd ever smoked. So Department men and ordinary Citizens smoked different cigs.

"Frankly, Citizen Sampter, you have us puzzled," began Tollotson. He was a small man, in his thirties but well-preserved, with small, slitted eyes, slicked-back hair, a thin nose, a nervous tongue which darted out and licked his lips as he spoke. "We've made a preliminary investigation of you, and can find nothing. You're a Citizen, but with Department status. You seem to be unemployed. You have a strange habit of popping up every now and then, staying with us in our city for a while, then disappearing. You have no contractual arrangement with any woman, as far as we can tell you've never had. In brief, Citizen, you're something of a puzzle."

Gregory nodded, hardly paying attention. He could see the back of a clock on Tollotson's desk; vaguely, he could hear the mechanism purring. How much time did he have left?

"But we'll get back to that later," said Tollotson. "A man has been killed. Now, men are killed all the time, Citizen, except that these were very special circumstances. You know to whom I'm referring?"

"Gregory Jones." What time *was* it?

"Yes, Jones. Jones was to die today, at fifteen hours. Instead, he died last week. I think you know that this Department doesn't make mistakes. We can't afford to, because prognostications are useless if they don't come true. On the other hand, a record of verified predictions is essential to us, essential to Government. Do you follow?"

In spite of the situation, Gregory's interest began to rise. "I'm not sure I do," he admitted.

"Government is based on power. Power is based on a lot of things. On the cold facts of physical might, on dependence, even on tradition. But as much as anything else, it is based on faith. That faith must be blind and unreasoning, thalamic, not cerebral. And it's something of a circle, Citizen Sampter, for it is faith in power I am talking about."

Gregory got up, paced nervously. He caught a quick glimpse of the clock, sat down again. Fourteen: forty-five! "Why-why are you telling me this?"

"I'm coming to that, Citizen. Government does not make mistakes. If it does, its subjects won-

der, and where there is wonder there also is discontent, suspicion, doubt, and so forth. Now, one of the ways Government maintains blind faith is through Prognostication. We can predict. When we predict, things happen. Not sometimes, Citizen, but always. Result: blind faith. We predicted the death of Citizen Gregory Jones for today, in . . . un . . . thirteen minutes. Unfortunately, he died before then."

Manager Tollotson leaned forward, jabbed a well-manicured finger at the air between himself and Gregory. "Just how do you think we predict, Citizen?"

"I don't know." *Twelve minutes.*

"We'll get back to that presently. More important for present consideration is this fact: three people knew that Citizen Jones died ahead of schedule. Citizen Dane Kibberish knew, Citizen Diane Sanders knew. And you also knew, Citizen Sampter. *We cannot let that knowledge get around. At all costs, we must stop it.*"

Gregory wanted to scream. Words, all those words were so much drivel. Citizen Gregory Jones did not die ahead of schedule. Ten minutes from now he would die—on time to the minute. Right here, in Manager Tollotson's office. Wouldn't Tollotson be surprised! I can just see his face, thought Gregory. Only I won't. I'll be dead.

"Very well. You now are aware that the knowledge must be suppressed. Let's return to my earlier question, Citizen. How do you suppose we predict things?"

"Why, I don't know. Probably you have some gadget. A thinking

machine or something, which can take data and—"

"That's the theory. Oh, yes, that's the theory, Citizen. Pretty good, don't you think? You have Departmental status, and you believe it fully. Can you imagine how the average Citizen swallows it? When the spirit moves us, we predict death. We can predict it for everyone, if we want to. But for some unknown reason, we don't. We merely predict occasionally, but often enough to keep our power in mind. Often enough to show the Citizens the extent of our domain—why, it almost encroaches upon the old religious institution which, incidentally, is a corollary of what actually happened. Government's power would have been restricted by anything like a religious institution. Result: no religion. Do I make myself clear?"

"What time is it?"

"Seven minutes to the fifteenth hour. Do I make myself clear?"

"Yes, yes! Go on!" He didn't, not at all.

"Do you know Citizen Dane Kibberish?"

That was an odd question, "Yes—no! No, I don't know him. Who is he?" Gregory knew Kibberish, but Citizen Alec Sampter did not.

"One of the three people who knew that Gregory Jones perished ahead of schedule. We're thorough, Citizen. We've checked on all the man's acquaintances and find that only three knew of his untimely demise. Now, take Kibberish as a case in point. He's stupid, quite stupid. Yet he has passed his tests and will be spaced

out to the Utopia colonies later today."

"Today? Are they leaving for the colonies today?"

"Yes. The announcement will be made public in half an hour. At any rate, can't you understand what that means? Kibberish did not merit life on the colonies. *We gave it to him.* Because Kibberish has passed his tests, he won't remain here on Earth to tell what he knows. The same is true of the woman, Diane Sanders. Actually, she's not a bad specimen; she almost did pass her tests. She'll space out with Kibberish and with the others who passed legitimately."

"What about me?" Gregory wanted to know. "I passed the tests too. So why did you bring me here?"

"You're an unusual case, Citizen. First, as I have said, you have Departmental status, but you are apparently unemployed. We can find out nothing more. As for passing these tests, come now, Citizen. You came close—but emotionally you are too unstable. You can thank us for that."

Tollotson drummed his fingers on the desk, groping for words. "We have an opening here in this Department, Citizen Sampter. Thus, your choice boils down to this: you can space out to Utopia, or you can stay here and work with us. Your qualifications seem adequate, we can ferret out the cause for your emotional instability and destroy it. You should be a good man."

Gregory nodded numbly, stood up and reached for another cig. He did not really want it, but in that position he could see the clock. Two minutes to the fifteenth hour!

"I know," Tollotson was saying. "Probably you prefer the Utopia colonies right now. But let me explain. It is a sort of game we play here in Prognostication, Citizen, and I think you will enjoy it. I have asked you how we make predictions; you could not answer the question. As yet, you haven't been told. Very well, this is your answer: *we don't make predictions at all.*"

"What? How can that be? I have known . . . I have seen . . . Why, in my own personal experience, I have—I don't understand . . ." The clock hummed and purred, hummed and purred. They'd better oil it one day soon, Gregory thought meaninglessly.

"Let me finish. We don't make predictions. We merely decide upon them in advance and then *make them happen.*"

A musical chiming sound filled the room. Fifteen hours . . .

Gregory stood up, whimpered, hurled the clock at a wall, laughed foolishly when it shattered. "WHAT?" he screamed. "WHAT?"

Tollotson smiled. "You see? See how emotionally unstable you are? You receive a mild intellectual surprise, and you start throwing things. Obviously, under ordinary circumstances you'd be unfit for the Utopia colonies, as would be Sanders and Kibberish.

"At any rate, we cannot predict anything, no more than an ancient fortune-teller ever could. It is merely a demonstration of power. We decide it is time for a prediction; we predict. If it is a prediction of death, we select someone who is healthy, hence not likely to die ahead of

schedule. Then, when the time comes, we see to it that he is destroyed. Physical violence, an accident, a virulent disease, the methods vary. Unfortunately, Citizen Gregory Jones crossed us up by dying too soon."

Tollotson leaned back, laced his fingers behind his head. "You can be a part of this—or you can space out for Utopia. The choice is yours."

Gregory felt giddy, light-headed. He'd never experienced anything like this before in his life. It was as if he weighed nothing; if he didn't plant his feet firmly, he'd likely float out through the window from sheer joy. He wasn't going to die: Prognostication was a ruse, a phony, a paperdragon which snorted cellophane fire at the Citizenry and kept them fearful.

"My choice?" he said, his voice breaking. "My choice. Why—why, I shall space out to the Utopia colonies with the others, thank you, sir. If it is all the same to you, I shall space out for Utopia."

"Suit yourself," said Tollotson. "I suppose, then, that our little interview is concluded. You are sure you won't reconsider?"

"Yes. Yes, I'm sure. Tell me, confidentially, are the colonies on Venus or Mars? Some say that Venus has a poisonous atmosphere, while others insist Mars is too cold . . ."

"I wouldn't know," said Manager Tollotson, dismissing Gregory with a curt nod of his head.

A wonderful feeling of peace and well-being stole over Gregory as he walked toward the bus depot. It was a new feeling and he let it bathe him, body and soul. Often, he thought

that the Leader must feel like that. But now he knew he had been a victim of indoctrination. The Leader, the mysterious Leader who ruled the world and whom no one knew, wasn't all sweetness and light. Far from it. The Leader was a vicious, heartless egoist, preying on the Citizenry in the guise of a benevolent ruler. Except, of course, for those few fortunates who merited Utopia.

Gregory walked along, whistling. The warm glow spread out from him—he could *feel* it spreading out to take in all the world, all the downtrodden masses who did not know what he did. Well, perhaps one day in the future he would return from Utopia, a wiser and better man, to teach them. Perhaps one day in the future he would expose Government for what it was. That, he told himself, was the least he could do. He'd escaped, as it were, from the jaws of death, and he'd escaped with knowledge. The Citizens lived in filth, poverty, ignofance, fear—lived that way so that Government might be powerful.

It wasn't right. Well, time would unfold his course of action for Gregory. Meanwhile, a glorious new life awaited him on the Utopia colonies.

He was running by the time he neared the bus depot, and he heard an amplified voice blaring forth instructions: "Colonists for Utopia, assemble on ramp seven! Colonists for Utopia, on ramp seven! Bus departure in fifteen minutes!"

"Ramp seven?" Gregory asked an attendant. "Where is ramp seven?"

The man looked at him with envy.

"You're one of the colonists?"

"Yes."

"That way, sir." The man pointed, then trudged away wearily.

The bus was large, quite large, and shining new. Long and sleek, painted a bright blue, it awaited him. He could see the slots from which the gyro-blades would emerge after they left city traffic behind them.

And the colonists milled about happily, laughing, joking, hugging and kissing one another. He saw Dane Kibberish, almost said hello before he realized Kibberish did not know him. Kibberish was talking about his two children who would join him one day in the colonies.

"Alec!"

She was running to him. Diane. She flung her arms around his neck, her body jarring him pleasantly. He held her that way, against him, while her lips brushed his neck, while she whispered, "We're colonists, colonists, colonists!"

And then they filed into the bus and a smartly-uniformed driver climbed into his pilot chair. With a soft grinding sound, the bus swung away from its ramp. Gregory heard music, soft, wonderful music coming from some hidden microphone in the ceiling. He sat in one of the double seats near a window, and Diane set next to him, twining her fingers with his. They talked for a while, for a long while, and then it grew dark.

Soft lights, blue and soothing, lit up the interior of the bus. Soon after darkness was complete, Gregory became aware of a scraping sound, and through the window he could see the gyro-blades flashing in the

bright moon light as they emerged. Moments later, the bus took to the sky, soaring over plain and hill and river, heading out westward to the launching site. Lethargy crept over Gregory, pleasantly. He kissed Diane, who was breathing regularly beside him, and then he slept.

It was morning. Someone came around with food, and they all ate.

"I'm so excited," said Diane.

"It ain't that I don't want to go," Dane Kibberish called from somewhere. "I want to go, and I will. I only wish it was my kids. Those kids . . ."

The bus had landed.

They filed out, slowly, happily. They were on the desert, on a wide, barren expanse of gleaming white sand. Gregory hardly saw it.

He was aware only of the spaceship.

It stood there, a long, slender column, tapering toward the top. Immense, more beautiful than anything he'd ever seen before, with the sunlight catching and highlighting a thousand points along its great surface.

"The ship!" cried Diane, running forward.

And others, "The ship, the ship! Here it is!"

"I wish they coulda seen it," mumbled Dane Kibberish, stumbling along in the second wave of people which surged forward.

Once Gregory looked back. Trailing dust behind it, the bus had departed.

And that was as it should be, he realized. Blast-off area was rigidly patrolled many miles away from the spaceship itself. There must be no

stowaways, no one who did not belong, no one unfit for Utopia.

Other buses came, disgorged their Citizens, left. A thousand people laughed and cried and jumped up and down on the desert sand. Hand in hand, Gregory and Diane walked toward the gaping portal at the ship's base. Beside it was a small concrete structure, a sort of block house, and as Gregory came closer, he saw three men standing there. Bright green uniforms, yellow insignia. Deputies to the leader, those three silent men! Of course, they would be the ones to send the ship hurtling on its automatic course to the stars.

Everything had a dreamlike quality. The eager lines of Citizens shuffling forward, the too-bright sun, the endless flat carpet of the desert, the huge ship. Mostly the ship, symbol for everything which was beautiful and good and fine and wonderful.

"The ship," Diane breathed, almost reverently, and entered. The port was small, smaller than Gregory had realized, and he'd pushed her ahead of him, preparing to follow.

A hand fell heavily on his shoulder, Another one grabbed his arm. Horrified, he gazed upon the stolid faces of the Leader's deputies. Virtually no one ever saw those green uniforms, but everyone knew and feared their color. Then, somehow, his ruse had been discovered. Perhaps it was the one-eyed man, he thought grimly, perhaps they'd learned that Gregory-Alec had murdered the one-eyed man.

"Please!" he cried. "I must enter the ship."

"Well said," one of the deputies grunted, and then they pulled him away from the portal. He struggled, turned once and saw Diane standing there in indecision. But those behind pushed forward, and soon she disappeared within the ship.

They bore Gregory, struggling, to the concrete blockhouse. They thrust him inside and returned to watch the Citizens file into the ship. Twice Gregory ran for the door, and twice they shoved him back, and whimpering hopelessly, Gregory fled into the little concrete room and waited.

All his plans and dreams, for nothing. He'd discovered evil and achieved his own personal triumph simultaneously, and now neither mattered. Once again, death loomed before him. Well, they couldn't do that, not without a fight. Maybe he would not achieve the happiness of the colonies, but with his dying breath he would fight the evil which had done this, the evil which was responsible, somehow, for all his troubles.

Presently the stolid figures entered the block house, shut the door behind them. Hopelessly, Gregory gazed out through the one thick window at the spaceship. Then, one of the men crossed the room, fingered a lever protruding from the wall, pulled it down.

Outside, there was a flash, a blinding, searing stab of light. Gregory gaped. The huge spaceship was aflame!

It burned brightly and quickly, the seething, rolling flames engulfing its entire length in micro-

seconds. "An accident!" Gregory screamed. "They'll all die."

Quickly, the ship burned and burned. Soon it was nothing more than a charred, blackened ruin.

"They're already dead," said one of the deputies. "The new cremation setup is even better than last year's."

The words took time to penetrate. Cremation?

Cremation! Gregory's heart felt like it would explode. *Fool, fool, don't you see?* There were no Utopia colonies, ever. The standard of living was low, and yet the Citizens had to produce, produce, produce. They couldn't remain idle. They produced meaningless gadgets for a colony which did not exist, thought Gregory. They dreamed of going there, too, to that place which did not exist, and it was that dream, above everything else, which kept them satisfied with their mean existence. They dreamed and hoped and yearned and studied themselves straight to a crematorium!

It was unspeakable evil. The world had never known anything like it. And he was as good as dead, Gregory knew. But if he could take

something of that evil to the grave with him, if he could fight it, if he could even kill one of these deputies . . .

"You had us worried," one of them said.

"Indeed you did. We looked everywhere. Some day that propensity of yours for going down among the Citizens and looking for trouble spots will get *you* into trouble."

No Utopia colonies, thought Gregory. No space travel. A terrible lie, like so much else, and—*What!* Evil was a relative thing, and Gregory began to laugh. The warm feeling of well-being crept over him once more. This time, he knew it would stay. Alec Sampter, who had Departmental status but who seemed unemployed, who came to the city briefly and lived in a hostel . . .

One of the deputies demanded, "What happened to your face, Mightiness?"

"Eh?" said Gregory. "Nothing. Just an accident. But perhaps you're right. Perhaps I'd better be more careful in the future," the Leader finished.

The End

Continued from page 26

robots every second, robots which were based in the subterranean building complex housing Cerebra-1. Robots were setting aside their work and quietly destroying their human supervisors, and preparing to head for the main control room, unknown to Narciso and Steinhauser and to Billy Joe, who was even now rolling what would be his last cigarette.

And when the robots broke into the control room and attacked the three

men from the Ministry and permanently interrupted the work of the technicians who had been cutting with acetylene torches, a new phase in human and robot history was in progress.

For, as it printed out Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation for an audience who were too busy dying to snatch at the message and read, Cerebra-1 had begun to free the slaves.

The End



DEATH OF A SPACEMAN

BY WALTER M. MILLER, JR.

The manner in which a man has lived is often the key to the way he will die. Take old man Donegal, for example. Most of his adult life was spent in digging a hole through space to learn what was on the other side. Would he go out the same way?

OLD DONEGAL was dying. They had all known it was coming, and they watched it come — his haggard wife, his daughter, and now his grandson, home on emergency leave from the pre-astronautics academy. Old Donegal knew it too, and had known it from the beginning, when he had begun to lose control of his legs and was forced to walk with a cane. But most of the time, he pretended to let them keep the secret they shared with the doctors — that the operations had all been failures, and that the cancer that fed at his spine would gnaw its way brainward until the paralysis engulfed vital organs, and then Old Donegal would cease to be. It would be cruel to let them know that he knew. Once, weeks ago, he had joked about the approaching shadows.

"Buy the plot back where people won't walk over it, Martha," he said. "Get it way back under the cedars — next to the fence. There aren't many graves back there yet. I want to be alone."

"Don't *talk* that way, Donny!" his wife had choked. "You're not dying."

His eyes twinkled maliciously. "Listen, Martha, I want to be buried face-down. I want to be buried with my back to space, understand? Don't let them lay me out like a lily."

"Donny, *please!*"

"They oughta face a man the way he's headed," Donegal grunted. "I been up — *way* up. Now I'm going straight down."

Martha had fled from the room in tears. He had never done it again, except to the interns and nurses, who, while they insisted

that he was going to get well, didn't mind joking with him about it.

Martha can bear my death, he thought, can bear pre-knowledge of it. But she couldn't bear thinking that he might take it calmly. If he accepted death gracefully, it would be like deliberately leaving her, and Old Donegal had decided to help her believe whatever would be comforting to her in such a troublesome moment.

"When'll they let me out of this bed again?" he complained.

"Be patient, Donny," she sighed. "It won't be long. You'll be up and around before you know it."

"Back on the moon-run, maybe?" he offered. "Listen, Martha, I been planet-bound too long. I'm not too old for the moon-run, am I? Sixty-three's not so old."

That had been carrying things too far. She knew he was hoaxing, and dabbed at her eyes again. The dead must humor the mourners, he thought, and the sick must comfort the visitors. It was always so.

But it was harder, now that the end was near. His eyes were hazy, and his thoughts unclear. He could move his arms a little, clumsily, but feeling was gone from them. The rest of his body was lost to him. Sometimes he seemed to feel his stomach and his hips, but the sensation was

mostly an illusion offered by higher nervous centers, like the "ghost-arm" that an amputee continues to feel. The wires were down, and he was cut off from himself.

He lay wheezing on the hospital bed, in his own room, in his own rented flat. Gaunt and unshaven, gray as winter twilight, he lay staring at the white net curtains that billowed gently in the breeze from the open window. There was no sound in the room but the sound of breathing and the loud ticking of an alarm clock. Occasionally he heard a chair scraping on the stone terrace next door, and the low mutter of voices, sometimes laughter, as the servants of the Keith mansion arranged the terrace for late afternoon guests.

With considerable effort, he rolled his head toward Martha who sat beside the bed, pinch-faced and weary.

"You ought to get some sleep," he said.

"I slept yesterday. Don't talk, Donny. It tires you."

"You ought to get more sleep. You never sleep enough. Are you afraid I'll get up and run away if you go to sleep for awhile?"

She managed a brittle smile. "There'll be plenty of time for sleep when . . . when you're well again." The brittle smile fled and she swallowed hard, like swallow-

ing a fish-bone. He glanced down, and noticed that she was squeezing his hand spasmodically.

There wasn't much left of the hand, he thought. Bones and ugly tight-stretched hide spotted with brown. Bulging knuckles with yellow cigaret stains. My hand. He tried to tighten it, tried to squeeze Martha's thin one in return. He watched it open and contract a little, but it was like operating a remote-control mechanism. Goodbye, hand, you're leaving me the way my legs did, he told it. I'll see you again in hell. How hammy can you get, Old Donegal? You maudlin ass.

"Requiescat," he muttered over the hand, and let it lie in peace.

Perhaps she heard him. "Donny," she whispered, leaning closer, "won't you let me call the priest now? Please."

He rattled a sigh and rolled his head toward the window again. "Are the Keiths having a party today?" he asked. "Sounds like they're moving chairs out on the terrace."

"Please, Donny, the priest?"

He let his head roll aside and closed his eyes, as if asleep. The bed shook slightly as she quickly caught at his wrist to feel for a pulse.

"If I'm not dying, I don't need a priest," he said sleepily.

"That's not right," she scolded softly. "You know that's not

right, Donny. You know better."

Maybe I'm being too rough on her? he wondered. He hadn't minded getting baptized her way, and married her way, and occasionally priest-handled the way she wanted him to when he was home from a space-run, but when it came to dying, Old Donegal wanted to do it his own way.

He opened his eyes at the sound of a bench being dragged across the stone terrace. "Martha, what kind of a party are the Keith's having today?"

"I wouldn't know," she said stiffly. "You'd think they'd have a little more respect. You'd think they'd put it off a few days."

"Until —?"

"Until you feel better."

"I feel fine, Martha. I like parties. I'm glad they're having one. Pour me a drink, will you? I can't reach the bottle anymore."

"It's empty."

"No it isn't, Martha, it's still a quarter full. I know. I've been watching it."

"You shouldn't have it, Donny. Please don't."

"But this is a party, Martha. Besides, the doctor says I can have whatever I want. Whatever I want, you hear? That means I'm getting well, doesn't it?"

"Sure, Donny, sure. Getting well."

"The whiskey, Martha. Just a finger in a tumbler, no more. I

want to feel like it's a party."

Her throat was rigid as she poured it. She helped him get the tumbler to his mouth. The liquor seared his throat, and he gagged a little as the fumes clogged his nose. Good whiskey, the best — but he couldn't take it any more. He eyed the green stamp on the neck of the bottle on the bed-table and grinned. He hadn't had whiskey like that since his space-days. Couldn't afford it now, not on a blastman's pension.

He remembered how he and Caid used to smuggle a couple of fifth aboard for the moon-run. If they caught you, it meant suspension, but there was no harm in it, not for the blastroom men who had nothing much to do from the time the ship acquired enough velocity for the long, long coaster ride until they started the rockets again for Lunar landing. You could drink a fifth, jettison the bottle through the trash lock, and sober up before you were needed again. It was the only way to pass the time in the cramped cubicle, unless you ruined your eyes trying to read by the glow-lamps. Old Donegal chuckled. If he and Caid had stayed on the run, Earth would have a ring by now, like Saturn — a ring of Old Granddad bottles.

"You said it, Donny-boy," said the misty man by the billowing curtains. "Who else knows the

Gegenschein is broken glass?"

Donegal laughed. Then he wondered what the man was doing there. The man was lounging against the window, and his unzipped space rig draped about him in an old familiar way. Loose plug-in connections and hose-ends dangled about his lean body. He was freckled and grinning.

"Caid," Old Donegal breathed softly.

"What did you say, Donny?" Martha answered.

Old Donegal blinked hard and shook his head. Something let go with a soggy snap, and the misty man was gone. I'd better take it easy on the whiskey, he thought. You got to wait, Donegal, old lush, until Nora and Ken get here. You can't get drunk until they're gone, or you might get them mixed up with memories like Caid's.

Car doors slammed in the street below. Martha glanced toward the window.

"Think it's them? I wish they'd get here. I wish they'd hurry."

Martha arose and tiptoed to the window. She peered down toward the sidewalk, put on a sharp frown. He heard a distant mutter of voices and occasional laughter, with group-footsteps milling about on the sidewalk. Martha murmured her disapproval and closed the window.

"Leave it open," he said.

"But the Keith's guests are

starting to come. There'll be such a racket." She looked at him hopefully, the way she did when she prompted his manners before company came.

Maybe it wasn't decent to listen in on a party when you were dying, he thought. But that wasn't the reason. Donegal, your chamber-pressure's dropping off. Your brains are in your butt-end, where a spacer's brains belong, but your butt-end died last month. She wants the window closed for her own sake, not yours.

"Leave it closed," he grunted. "But open it again before the moon-run blasts off. I want to listen."

She smiled and nodded, glancing at the clock. "It'll be an hour and a half yet. I'll watch the time."

"I hate that clock. I wish you'd throw it out. It's loud."

"It's your medicine-clock, Donny." She came back to sit down at his bedside again. She sat in silence. The clock filled the room with its clicking pulse.

"What time are they coming?" he asked.

"Nora and Ken? They'll be here soon. Don't fret."

"Why should I fret?" He chuckled. "That boy — he'll be a good spacer, won't he, Martha?"

Martha said nothing, fanned at a fly that crawled across his pillow. The fly buzzed up in an angry spiral and alighted on the

ceiling. Donegal watched it for a time. The fly had natural-born space-legs. I know your tricks, he told it with a smile, and I learned to walk on the bottomside of things before you were a maggot. You stand there with your magnasoles hanging to the hull, and the rest of you's in free fall. You jerk a sole loose, and your knee flies up to your belly, and reaction spins you half-around and near throws your other hip out of joint if you don't jam the foot down fast and jerk up the other. It's worse'n trying to run through knee-deep mud with snow-shoes, and a man'll go nuts trying to keep his arms and legs from taking off in odd directions. I know your tricks, fly. But the fly was born with his magnasoles, and he trotted across the ceiling like Donegal never could.

"That boy Ken — he ought to make a damn good space-engineer," wheezed the old man.

Her silence was long, and he rolled his head toward her again. Her lips tight, she stared down at the palm of his hand, unfolded his bony fingers, felt the cracked calluses that still welted the shrunken skin, calluses worn there by the linings of space gauntlets and the handles of fuel valves, and the rungs of get-about ladders during free fall.

"I don't know if I should tell you," she said.

"Tell me what, Martha?"

She looked up slowly, scrutinizing his face. "Ken's changed his mind, Nora says. Ken doesn't like the academy. She says he wants to go to medical school."

Old Donegal thought it over, nodded absently. "That's fine. Space medics get good pay." He watched her carefully.

She lowered her eyes, rubbed at his calluses again. She shook her head slowly. "He doesn't want to go to space."

The clock clicked loudly in the closed room.

"I thought I ought to tell you, so you won't say anything to him about it," she added.

Old Donegal looked grayer than before. After a long silence, he rolled his head away and looked toward the limp curtains.

"Open the window, Martha," he said.

Her tongue clucked faintly as she started to protest, but she said nothing. After frozen seconds, she sighed and went to open it. The curtains billowed, and a babble of conversation blew in from the terrace of the Keith mansion. With the sound came the occasional brassy discord of a musician tuning his instrument. She clutched the window-sash as if she wished to slam it closed again.

"Well! Music!" grunted Old Donegal. "That's good. This is some shebang. Good whiskey and good music and you." He chuckled,

but it choked off into a fit of coughing.

"Donny, about Ken —"

"No matter, Martha," he said hastily. "Space-medic's pay is good."

"But Donny —" She turned from the window, stared at him briefly, then said, "Sure, Donny, sure," and came back to sit down by his bed.

He smiled at her affectionately. She was a man's woman, was Martha — always had been, still was. He had married her the year he had gone to space — a lissome, wistful, old fashioned lass, with big violet eyes and gentle hands and gentle thoughts — and she had never complained about the long and lonely weeks between blast-off and glide-down, when most spacer's wives listened to the psychiatrists and soap-operas and soon developed the symptoms that were expected of them, either because the symptoms were *chic*, or because they felt they should do something to earn the pity that was extended to them. "It's not so bad," Martha had assured him. "The house keeps me busy till Nora's home from school, and then there's a flock of kids around till dinner. Nights are a little empty, but if there's a moon, I can always go out on the porch and look at it and know where you are. And Nora gets out the telescope you built her, and we make a game of it. 'Seeing if

Daddy's still at the office' she calls it."

"Those were the days," he muttered.

"What, Donny?"

"Do you remember that Steve Farran song?"

She paused, frowning thoughtfully. There were a lot of Steve Farran songs, but after a moment she picked the right one, and sang it softly . . .

"O moon whereo'er the clouds fly,
Beyond the willow tree,
There is a ramblin' space guy
I wish you'd save for me."

"*Mare Tranquillitatis*,
O dark and tranquil sea,
Until he drops from heaven,
Rest him there with thee . . ."

Her voice cracked, and she laughed. Old Donegal chuckled weakly.

"Fried mush," he said. "That one made the cats wilt their ears and wail at the moon."

"I feel real crazy," he added. "Hand me the king kong, fluff-muff."

"Keep cool, Daddy-O, you've had enough." Martha reddened and patted his arm, looking pleased. Neither of them had talked that way, even in the old days, but the out-dated slang brought back memories — school parties, dances at the Rocketport

Club, the early years of the war when Donegal had jockeyed an R-43 fighter in the close-space assaults against the Soviet satellite project. The memories were good.

A brassy blare of modern "slide" arose suddenly from the Keith terrace as the small orchestra launched into its first number. Martha caught an angry breath and started toward the window.

"Leave it," he said. "It's a party. Whiskey, Martha. Please — just a small one."

She gave him a hurtful glance.

"Whiskey. Then you can call the priest."

"Donny, it's not right. You know it's not right — to bargain for such as that."

"All right. Whiskey. Forget the priest."

She poured it for him, and helped him get it down, and then went out to make the phone-call. Old Donegal lay shuddering over the whiskey taste and savoring the burn in his throat. Jesus, but it was good.

You old bastard, he thought, you got no right to enjoy life when nine-tenths of you is dead already, and the rest is foggy as a thermal dust-rise on the lunar maria at hell-dawn. But it wasn't a bad way to die. It ate your consciousness away from the feet up; it gnawed away the Present, but it let you keep the Past, until

everything faded and blended. Maybe that's what Eternity was, he thought — one man's subjective Past, all wrapped up and packaged for shipment, a single space-time entity, a one-man microcosm of memories, when nothing else remains.

"If I've got a soul, I made it myself," he told the gray nun at the foot of his bed.

The nun held out a pie pan, rattled a few coins in it. "Contribute to the Radiation Victims' Relief?" the nun purred softly.

"I know you," he said. "You're my conscience. You hang around the officer's mess, and when we get back from a sortie, you make us pay for the damage we did. But that was forty years ago."

The nun smiled, and her luminous eyes were on him softly. "Mother of God!" he breathed, and reached for the whiskey. His arm obeyed. The last drink had done him good. He had to watch his hand to see where it was going, and squeezed the neck until his fingers whitened so that he knew that he had it, but he got it off the table and onto his chest, and he got the cork out with his teeth. He had a long pull at the bottle and it made his eyes water and his hands grow weak. But he got it back to the table without spilling a bit, and he was proud of himself.

The room was spinning like the cabin of a gyro-gravved ship. By

the time he wrestled it to a standstill, the nun was gone. The blare of music from the Keith terrace was louder, and laughing voices blended with it. Chairs scraping and glasses rattling. A fine party, Keith, I'm glad you picked today. This shebang would be the younger Keith's affair. Ronald Tonwyler Keith, III, scion of Orbital Engineering and Construction Company — builders of the moon-shuttle ships that made the run from the satellite station to Luna and back.

It's good to have such important neighbors, he thought. He wished he had been able to meet them while he was still up and about. But the Keith's place was walled-in, and when a Keith came out, he charged out in a limousine with a chauffeur at the wheel, and the iron gate closed again. The Keiths built the wall when the surrounding neighborhood began to grow shabby with age. It had once been the best of neighborhoods, but that was before Old Donegal lived in it. Now it consisted of sooty old houses and rented flats, and the Keith place was really not a part of it anymore. Nevertheless, it was really something when a pensioned blastman could say, "I live out close to the Keiths — you know, the *Ronald* Keiths." At least, that's what Martha always told him.

The music was so loud that he never heard the doorbell ring, but

when a lull came, he heard Nora's voice downstairs, and listened hopefully for Ken's. But when they came up, the boy was not with them.

"Hello, skinny-britches," he greeted his daughter.

Nora grinned and came over to kiss him. Her hair dangled about his face, and he noticed that it was blacker than usual, with the gray streaks gone from it again.

"You smell good," he said.

"You don't, -Pops. You smell like a sot. Naughty!"

"Where's Ken?"

She moistened her lips nervously and looked away. "He couldn't come. He had to take a driver's lesson. He really couldn't help it. If he didn't go, he'd lose his turn, and then he wouldn't finish before he goes back to the academy." She looked at him apologetically.

"It's all right, Nora."

"If he missed it, he wouldn't get his copter license until summer."

"It's okay. Copters! Hell, the boy should be in jets by now!"

Several breaths passed in silence. She gazed absently toward the window and shook her head. "No jets, Pop. Not for Ken."

He glowered at her. "Listen! How'll he get into space? He's got to get his jet licenses first. Can't get in rockets without 'em."

Nora shot a quick glance at her mother. Martha rolled her eyes

as if sighing patiently. Nora went to the window to stare down toward the Keith terrace. She tucked a cigaret between scarlet lips, lit it, blew nervous smoke against the pane.

"Mom, can't you call them and have that racket stopped?"

"Donny says he likes it."

Nora's eyes flitted over the scene below. "Female butterflies and puppy-dogs in sport jackets. And the cadets." She snorted. "Cadets! Imagine Ron Keith the Third ever going to space. The old man buys his way into the academy, and they throw a brawl as if Ronny passed the Compets."

"Maybe he did," growled Old Donegal.

"Hah!"

"They live in a different world, I guess," Martha sighed.

"If it weren't for men like Pops, they'd never've made their fortune."

"I like the music, I tell you," grumbled the old man.

"I'm half-a-mind to go over there and tell them off," Nora murmured.

"Let them alone. Just so they'll stop the racket for blast-away."

"Look at them! — polite little pattern-cuts, all alike. They take pre-space, because it's the thing to do. Then they quit before the pay-off comes."

"How do you know they'll quit?"

"That party — I bet it cost

six months' pay, spacer's pay," she went on, ignoring him. "And what do real spacer's get? Oley gets killed, and Pop's pension wouldn't feed the Keith's cat."

"You don't understand, girl."

"I lost Oley. I understand enough."

He watched her silently for a moment, then closed his eyes. It was no good trying to explain, no good trying to tell her the dough didn't mean a damn thing. She'd been a spacer's wife, and that was bad enough, but now she was a spacer's widow. And Oley? Oley's tomb revolved around the sun in an eccentric orbit that spun-in close to Mercury, then reached out into the asteroid belt, once every 725 days. When it came within rocket radius of Earth, it whizzed past at close to fifteen miles a second.

You don't rescue a ship like that, skinny-britches, my darling daughter. Nor do you salvage it after the crew stops screaming for help. If you use enough fuel to catch it, you won't get back. You just leave such a ship there forever, like an asteroid, and it's a damn shame about the men trapped aboard. Heroes all, no doubt — but the smallness of the widow's monthly check failed to confirm the heroism, and Nora was bitter about the price of Oley's memory, perhaps.

Ouch! Old Donegal, you know

she's not like that. It's just that she can't understand about space. You ought to make her understand.

But did he really understand himself? You ride hot in a roaring blast-room, hands tense on the mixer controls and the pumps, eyes glued to instruments, body sucked down in a four-gravity thrust, and wait for the command to choke it off. Then you float free and weightless in a long nightmare as the beast coasts moonward, a flung javelin.

The "romance" of space — drivel written in the old days. When you're not blasting, you float in a cramped hotbox, crawl through dirty mazes of greasy pipe and cable to tighten a lug, scratch your arms and bark your shins, get sick and choked up because no gravity helps your gullet get the food down. Liquid is worse, but you gag your whiskey down because you have to.

Stars? — you see stars by squinting through a viewing lens, and it's like a photo-transparency, and if you aren't careful, you'll get an eyeful of Old Blinder and back off with a punch-drunk retina.

Adventure? — unless the skipper calls for course-correction, you float around in the blast-cubicle with damn little to do between blast-away and moon-down, except sweat out the omniscient accident statistics. If the beast

blows up or gets gutted in space, a statistic had your name on it, that's all, and there's no fighting back. You stay outwardly sane because you're a hog for punishment; if you weren't, you'd never get past the psychologists.

"Did you like horror movies when you were a kid?" asked the psych. And you'd damn well better answer "yes," if you want to go to space.

Tell her, old man, you're her pop. Tell her why it's worth it, if you know. You jail yourself in a coffin-size cubicle, and a crazy beast thunders berserk for uncontrollable seconds, and then you soar in ominous silence for the long long hours. Grow sweaty, filthy, sick, miserable, idle — somewhere out in Big Empty, where Man's got no business except the trouble he always makes for himself wherever he goes. Tell her why it's worth it, for pay less than a good bricklayer's. Tell her why Oley would do it again.

"It's a sucker's run, Nora," he said. "You go looking for kicks, but the only kicks you get to keep is what Oley got. God knows why — but it's worth it."

Nora said nothing. He opened his eyes slowly. Nora was gone. Had she been there at all?

He blinked around at the fuzzy room, and dissolved the shifting shadows that sometimes emerged

as old friendly faces, grinning at him. He found Martha.

"You went to sleep," said Martha. "She had to go. Kennie called. He'll be over later, if you're not too tired."

"I'm not tired. I'm all head. There's nothing much to get tired."

"I love you, Old Donegal."

"Hold my hand again."

"I'm holding it, old man."

"Then hold me where I can feel it."

She slid a thin arm under his neck, and bent over his face to kiss him. She was crying a little, and he was glad she could do it now without fleeing the room.

"Can I talk about dying now?" he wondered aloud.

She pinched her lips together and shook her head.

"I lie to myself, Martha. You know how much I lie to myself?"

She nodded slowly and stroked his gray temples.

"I lie to myself about Ken, and about dying. If Ken turned spacer, I wouldn't die — that's what I told myself. You know?"

She shook her head. "Don't talk, Donny, please."

"A man makes his own soul, Martha."

"That's not true. You shouldn't say things like that."

"A man makes his own soul, but it dies with him, unless he can pour it into his kids and his grandchildren before he goes. I lied to myself. Ken's a yellow-belly. Nora

made him one, and the boots won't fit."

"Don't, Donny. You'll excite yourself again."

"I was going to give him the boots — the over-boots with magnasoles. But they won't fit him. They won't ever fit him. He's a lily-livered lap-dog, and he whines. Bring me my boots, woman."

"Donny!"

"The boots, they're in my locker in the attic. I want them."

"What on earth!"

"Bring me my goddam space boots and put them on my feet. I'm going to wear them."

"You can't; the priest's coming."

"Well, get them anyway. What time is it? You didn't let me sleep through the moon-run blast, did you?"

She shook her head. "It's half an hour yet . . . I'll get the boots if you promise not to make me put them on you."

"I want them on."

"You can't, until Father Paul's finished."

"Do I have to get my feet buttered?"

She sighed. "I wish you wouldn't say things like that. I wish you wouldn't, Donny. It's sacrilege, you know it is."

"All right — 'annointed'," he corrected wearily.

"Yes, you do."

"The boots, woman, the boots."

She went to get them. While she

was gone, the doorbell rang, and he heard her quick footsteps on the stairs, and then Father Paul's voice asking about the patient. Old Donegal groaned inwardly. After the priest, the doctor would come, at the usual time, to see if he were dead yet. The doctor had let him come home from the hospital to die, and the doctor was getting impatient. Why don't they let me alone? he growled. Why don't they let me handle it in my own way, and stop making a fuss over it? I can die and do a good job of it without a lot of outside interference, and I wish they'd quit picking at me with syringes and sacraments and enemas. All he wanted was a chance to listen to the orchestra on the Keith terrace, to drink the rest of his whiskey, and to hear the beast blast-away for the satellite on the first lap of the run to Luna.

It's going to be my last day, he thought. My eyes are going fuzzy, and I can't breathe right, and the throbbing's hurting my head. Whether he lived through the night wouldn't matter, because delirium was coming over him, and then there would be the coma, and the symbolic fight to keep him pumping and panting. I'd rather die tonight and get it over with, he thought, but they probably won't let me go.

He heard their voices coming up the stairs . . .

"Nora tried to get them to stop it, Father, but she couldn't get in to see anybody but the butler. He told her he'd tell Mrs. Keith, but nothing happened. It's just as loud as before."

"Well, as long as Donny doesn't mind —"

"He just says that. You know how he is."

"What're they celebrating, Martha?"

"Young Ronald's leaving — for pre-space training. It's a going-away affair." They paused in the doorway. The small priest smiled in at Donegal and nodded. He set his black bag on the floor inside, winked solemnly at the patient.

"I'll leave you two alone," said Martha. She closed the door and her footsteps wandered off down the hall.

Donegal and the young priest eyed each other warily.

"You look like hell, Donegal," the padre offered jovially. "Feeling nasty?"

"Skip the small talk. Let's get this routine over with."

The priest humphed thoughtfully, sauntered across to the bed, gazed down at the old man disinterestedly. "What's the matter? Don't want the 'routine'? Rather play it tough?"

"What's the difference?" he growled. "Hurry up and get out. I want to hear the beast blast off."

"You won't be able to," said the priest, glancing at the window,

now closed again. "That's quite a racket next door."

"They'd better stop for it. They'd better quiet down for it. They'll have to turn it off for five minutes or so."

"Maybe they won't."

It was a new idea, and it frightened him. He liked the music, and the party's gaiety, the nearness of youth and good times — but it hadn't occurred to him that it wouldn't stop so he could hear the beast.

"Don't get upset, Donegal. You know what a blast-off sounds like."

"But it's the last one. The last time. I want to hear."

"How do you know it's the last time?"

"Hell, don't I know when I'm kicking off?"

"Maybe, maybe not. It's hardly your decision."

"It's not, eh?" Old Donegal fumed. "Well, bigawd you'd think it wasn't. You'd think it was Martha's and yours and that damfool medic's. You'd think I got no say-so. Who's doing it anyway?"

"I would guess," Father Paul grunted sourly, "that Providence might appreciate His fair share of the credit."

Old Donegal made a surly noise and hunched his head back into the pillow to glower.

"You want me?" the priest asked. "Or is this just a case of

wifely conscience?"

"What's the difference? Give me the business and scram."

"No soap. Do you want the sacrament, or are you just being kind to your wife? If it's for Martha, I'll go *now*."

Old Donegal glared at him for a time, then wilted. The priest brought his bag to the bedside.

"Bless me, father, for I have sinned."

"Bless you, son."

"I accuse myself . . ."

Tension, anger, helplessness — they had piled up on him, and now he was feeling the after-effects. Vertigo, nausea, and the black confetti — a bad spell. The whiskey — if he could only reach the whiskey. Then he remembered he was receiving a Sacrament, and struggled to get on with it. Tell him, old man, tell him of your various rottennesses and vile transgressions, if you can remember some. A sin is whatever you're sorry for, maybe. But Old Donegal, you're sorry for the wrong things, and this young jesuitical gadget wouldn't like listening to it. I'm sorry I didn't get it instead of Oley, and I'm sorry I fought in the war, and I'm sorry I can't get out of this bed and take a belt to my daughter's backside for making a puny whelp out of Ken, and I'm sorry I gave Martha such a rough time all these years — and wound up dying in a cheap flat,

instead of giving her things like the Keith's had. I wish I had been a sharpster, contractor, or thief . . . instead of a common laboring spacer, whose species lost its glamor after the war.

Listen, old man, you made your soul yourself, and it's yours. This young dispenser of oils, Substances, and mysteries wishes only to help you scrape off the rough edges and gouge out the bad spots. He will not steal it, nor distort it with his supernatural chisels, nor make fun of it. He can take nothing away, but only cauterize and neutralize, he says, so why not let him try? Tell him the rotten messes.

"Are you finished, my son?"

Old Donegal nodded wearily, and said what he was asked to say, and heard the soft mutter of Latin that washed him inside and behind his ghostly ears . . . *ego te absolvo in Nomine Patris* . . . and he accepted the rest of it lying quietly in the candlelight and the red glow of the sunset through the window, while the priest anointed him and gave him Bread, and read the words of the soul in greeting its Spouse: "I was asleep, but my heart waked; it is the voice of my beloved calling: come to me my love, my dove, my undefiled . . ." and from beyond the closed window came the sarcastic wail of a clarinet painting hot slides against a rhythmic background.

It wasn't so bad, Old Donegal thought when the priest was done. He felt like a schoolboy in a starched shirt on Sunday morning, and it wasn't a bad feeling, though it left him weak.

The priest opened the window for him again, and repacked his bag. "Ten minutes till blast-off," he said. "I'll see what I can do about the racket next door."

When he was gone, Martha came back in, and he looked at her face and was glad. She was smiling when she kissed him, and she looked less tired.

"Is it all right for me to die now?" he grunted.

"Donny, don't start that again."

"Where's the boots? You promised to bring them?"

"They're in the hall. Donny, you don't want them."

"I want them, and I want a drink of whiskey, and I want to hear them fire the beast." He said it slow and hard, and he left no room for argument.

When she had got the huge boots over his shrunken feet, the magnasoles clanged against the iron bed-frame and clung there, and she rolled him up so that he could look at them, and Old Donegal chuckled inside. He felt warm and clean and pleasantly dizzy.

"The whiskey, Martha, and for God's sake, make them stop the

noise till after the firing. Please!"

She went to the window and looked out for a long time. Then she came back and poured him an insignificant drink.

"Well?"

"I don't know," she said. "I saw Father Paul on the terrace, talking to somebody."

"Is it time?"

She glanced at the clock, looked at him doubtfully, and nodded. "Nearly time."

The orchestra finished a number, but the babble of laughing voices continued. Old Donegal sagged. "They won't do it. They're the Keiths, Martha. Why should I ruin their party?"

She turned to stare at him, slowly shook her head. He heard someone shouting, but then a trumpet started softly, introducing a new number. Martha sucked in a hurt breath, pressed her hands together, and hurried from the room.

"It's too late," he said after her.

Her footsteps stopped on the stairs. The trumpet was alone. Donegal listened; and there was no babble of voices, and the rest of the orchestra was silent. Only the trumpet sang — and it puzzled him, hearing the same slow bugle-notes of the call played at the lowering of the colors.

The trumpet stopped suddenly. Then he knew it had been for him.

A brief hush — then thunder came from the blast-station two miles to the west. First the low reverberation, rattling the windows, then the rising growl as the sleek beast knifed skyward on a column of bluewhite hell. It grew and grew until it drowned the distant traffic sounds and dominated the silence outside.

Quit crying, you old fool, you maudlin ass . . .

"My boots," he whispered, "my boots . . . please . . ."

"You've got them on, Donny."

He sank quietly then. He closed his eyes and let his heart go up with the beast, and he sank into the gravity padding of the blast-room, and Caid was with him, and Olev. And when Ronald Keith, III, instructed the orches-

tra to play Blastroom Man, after the beast's rumble had waned, Old Donegal was on his last moon-run, and he was grinning. He'd had a good day.

Martha went to the window to stare out at the thin black trail that curled starward above the blast station through the twilight sky. Guests on the terrace were watching it too.

The doorbell rang. That would be Ken, too late. She closed the window against the chill breeze, and went back to the bed. The boots, the heavy, clumsy boots — they clung to the bedframe, with his feet half out of them. She took them off gently and set them out of company's sight. Then she went to answer the door.

The End

Continued from page 5

editors—we've conquered that, haven't we? Despite all the rationalizations, we read sf because we like it . . . don't we?

I hope we do, because the day sf is Good For You is going to be the day sf stops being worth writing or reading.

And—if we do—can't we gently accept the fact that we like to laugh, too?

The only trouble is, of course, the

obvious one:

Over-reaction.

If humor ever becomes acceptable, we may get a screamingly funny story about two nymphomaniacs, one of whom is an alien monster—and all written in impeccable, unbearable style.

The game might be worth that particular candle.

On the other hand . . .

Well, after all, how fearless and daring do you have to be?

THE RIGHT MISTAKE

Laurence M. Janifer

“Science is closing in on all of us.”

Exactly so; and the battle of man vs. machine is of staggering interest to us all, and more so every day. In 2001 the battle was demonstrated, with neatness and a pointed savagery; in *HOT MILLIONS* the battle is (or is supposed to be) simply used, to make us laugh.

The line quoted is delivered by a sad, moustached, Cockney-accented Peter Ustinov, early in the picture, and, obviously, to a great extent it is meant to provide the theme of the picture—in so far as a thorough farce, which feels no real necessity even to keep to its own threadlike premises, can be said to have a theme. Mr. Ustinov is an embezzler, who does his bit for the anti-machinery people by going up against a giant computer and succeeding, for the most part, in embezzling a great deal of cheerful, life-giving money.

The focus of interest in the movie is clear. Watch this human being take over the computer, link by link, inch by inch, printout by printout; watch the battle of giants and root for your favorite chunk of mass; toss

figurative (it is hoped) pop-bottles at any available umpire; and you can't tell the players without a course in binary arithmetic.

This interest is exactly as unsatisfied after the movie as before it; we do not even have the brief comfort of Chinese food; we do not have that pleasant hour of repletion before we get hungry again.

The computer assembly against which Mr. Ustinov (who, with Ira Wallach, is credited with the original screenplay) has pitted himself makes a good deal less sense than most of the spot-weld-some-busbars aggregations of world-wrecker sf. It contains many whirling reels, a television-set arrangement on which words or long strings of numbers appear, lots and lots of buttons and keys, and a flashing light. This light, we are told, is the key to the whole business; it makes the assembly “embezzler-proof”. Thinking that over carefully, I am not even sure I know what it is *supposed* to mean.

We see Mr. Ustinov go grimly to work on the computer. After a setback or two (and one neatly worked-out moment of near-discovery,

handled nicely by Bob Newhart, as ulcer-ridden as ever, and Karl Malden, who has apparently modelled his performance directly on the far superior performances of William Demarest, as well as by Mr. Ustinov), the flashing light surrenders, and Mr. Ustinov begins a fine lavish career of looting.

The film provides you with just as much detail as I have, and no more.

For the fan, then, or for the moviegoer who remembers the loving care which made, for instance, both RIFIFI and BIG DEAL ON MADONNA STREET so very effective by sheer attention to detail, the film is a dead loss.

There are, though, a good many points of interest.

The actors mentioned plus briefly appearing Robert Morley and Cesar Romero, are fine. The music, when it isn't by Vivaldi or Gluck, is mostly cheery and sharply aimed. Mr. Wallach is one of the major figures in what remains of American humor, and though I have a wistful feeling he would do better by leaving out a few of his more adventurous puns, the quibble is minor.

In fact, the picture clearly ought to be, at the least, reasonably funny.

It isn't; which is the most fascinating thing about it.

There is, it seems, an actress named Maggie Smith. Her previous screen credits include the following: THE V. I. P.s, THE PUMPKIN EATER, THE HONEYPOT, Laurence Olivier's OTHELLO, and a Rod Taylor vehicle, of insufficient escape speed called YOUNG CASIDY; if you have missed any of the foregoing rush out and see them

at once. Miss Smith is an actress of extraordinary capabilities.

As Mr. Ustinov's acquaintance . . . secretary . . . wife . . . she could not let the character go with caricature; instead, she has found something recognizable and very real in a single, lonely woman; in two long scenes with Mr. Ustinov she is totally human, touching, believable and irresistible.

This, naturally, destroys the comedy.

The effect is approximately that of hiring Greta Garbo to play the cat in a Walter Lantz cartoon. The irruption of reality into so slapdash a fantasy does not destroy reality; fantasy is less resistant.

Within the normal confines of this column, HOT MILLIONS not only cannot be recommended; it ought to be condemned. But Miss Smith is worth very nearly any price, and sitting through a disappointing movie seems rather a small payment to make.

Those interested in whether the people who please them continue to eat may want to consider the following.

St. Clair McKelway's TRUE TALES FROM THE ANNALS OF CRIME AND RASCALITY, a fine and mostly very funny collection of New Yorker articles, contains MR. 880—the perfectly true tale from which the Edmund Gwenn movie was later made. Mr. McKelway received screen credit; he also received money.

The book also contains THE WILLY WILBY, the story of an embezzler whose methods are very like

Continued on page 146

SCIENCE OF MAN

by LEON E. STOVER



APEMAN, SUPERMAN — OR, 2001'S ANSWER TO THE WORLD'S RIDDLE

Nobody who can identify the opening and closing bars of music in 2001 need puzzle long over the film's meaning.

At the start the eye of the camera looks down from barren hills, under the rising sun at dawn, into a still valley below. As the sun mounts, the eye advances into the valley. Zarathustra is come forth out of his cave; hailing the sun—"Thou great star!"—he descends from the hills once more to invest himself in humanity and go man's progress again. Zarathustra's cosmic mission is given out in the great blast of trumpets which pronounces the World Riddle theme C-G-C from THUS SPAKE ZARATHUSTRA by Richard Strauss.

APEMAN, SUPERMAN

Richard Strauss wrote of this music that it was his homage to the philosophical genius of Nietzsche:

I mean to convey by means of music an idea of the human race from its origins, through the various phases of its development, religious and scientific, up to Nietzsche's idea of the Superman.

Down there in that awesome valley human destiny is on the starting line with the apemen, members of the genus *Australopithecus*, discovered for anthropology in South and East Africa. The savannahland in the opening scenes is authentic East African landscape, which today is exactly as it was when the apemen roamed there

during Lower Pleistocene times. The apemen are shown to be peaceful and vegetarian. They spend all day eating and chewing plant foods.

But one morning a great, black monolith appears in the midst of their usual feeding place. The sheer perfection and improbability of this artifact arouses in the dim chambers of one apeman's preadamite brain some sense of form, and he reaches out to touch—fearfully at first, then with great yearning—the smooth surfaces and smart edges of this magnificently artificial thing. He is inspired to artifice himself. He discovers the principle of the lever, an extension of his arm, in a long bone picked out of a crumbled tapir skeleton. He bashes this club around experimentally in the pile of old bones from which he lifted it out, in a slow motion sequence of his great hairy arm lifting up and crashing down, causing debris to flower outward in floating arcs, intercut with visions of a falling tapir.

This insightful apeman leads his kind of hunting and meat eating. Meat eating takes less time than plant eating, and with it comes the leisure for tool making which in turn leads, eventually, to science and advanced technology. This first triumph of artifice, the hunting club, is underlined by the C-G-C World Riddle theme, climaxing in full orchestra and organ. The weapon is tossed to the air in a fit of religious exaltation while the apemen dance around the monolith, and . . .

. . . In a wipe that takes care of 3 million years of evolutionary history, the bone in its toss is replaced by a spaceship in flight. The camera comes

upon a great wheel-shaped orbital station that turns slowly and majestically to the tune of the Blue Danube, which waltzes for man's easy, technological virtuosity. The audience, accordingly, is treated to a long appreciation of the docking maneuvers, in 3/4 time, of a shuttle craft come up from Earth. Its single passenger is an American scientist on a secret mission to the crater Clavius on the moon, where mystery awaits.

The space platform is fitted out with Hilton, Pan Am and Bell Telephone services. The audience always ohs and ahs to see these familiar insignia in the world of the future, which goes to confirm what anthropologists have learned from disaster studies, that people really love their culture. It is part of them. People are thrown into a state of shock when floods, tornadoes or other destructive events remove large chunks of their familiar material environment.

The scientist from Earth continues the last leg of his journey by in a low flying moon bus, the while its occupants eat ham and cheese sandwiches. The juxtaposition of the eternally banal picnic lunch with the fantastic lunar landscape zipping by below serves to reemphasize the confident virtuosity of space technology. But this confidence is shattered by the mystery at Clavius: the monolith again, this time excavated out of lunar soil. While the suited party examines it, a stinging, ringing beam of shrill sound penetrates their helmets. The camera looks up from the very base of the monolith to the sun in a wide angle shot duplicating the one that brought the apemen sequence to

a close with the bone club soaring high.

The wipe from the screaming monolith to a ship headed for deep space covers just a decade or so. The energy emitted from the monolith fled toward Jupiter, the ship's destination. A crew of five (three in hibernation) and a talking, thinking I.B.M. 9000 series computer, occupy an enormous, sperm-shaped craft: man seeding the cosmos.

During the outward voyage the two men acting as caretakers on the ship are shown to display flatter personalities than the spirited computer, HAL, which is plugged into everything and runs everything. Man's technology has advanced so far that it is overwhelming. Technology, basically, is an artificial means of extending human organs. Clothes are an extension of the skin, a computer is an extension of the brain, a wheeled vehicle is an extension of the legs, a telephone is an extension of the ear and mouth, and so on. The more such extensions are elaborated by man, the more they seem to take on a life of their own and threaten to take over. A simple example of extensions getting out of hand is the urban congestion and air pollution created by use of the automobile in great numbers. Another is big organization, made possible by electronic extensions of the speech functions, which makes for suffocating dehumanization in the "organization man." To paraphrase Hamlet, "How like a cog is man!" The two men aboard ship are exactly that. HAL runs the ship and they act like low grade robots, passively eating colored paste for food that comes out of a machine, passively watching TV broadcasts from APEMAN, SUPERMAN

Earth, passively receiving birthday greetings from home.

HAL symbolizes that point of no return in the development of technology when man's extensions finally take over. They possess the more life the more man is devitalized by them. It will be suicide for man to continue in his love for his material culture. Dependence on an advanced state of technology makes it impossible to revert to a primitive state of technology. And it is too late to solve the problem with a "technological fix."

HAL reports an imminent malfunction in the directional antenna of the ship. One of the men, Astronaut Frank Poole, leaves the ship in a space pod in order to replace the unit. The old unit is brought back, tested, and found to be without defect. The two men worry about HAL's lapse of judgment. HAL insists the unit will fail on schedule. So Poole replaces the unit by way of testing HAL. But HAL tested is HAL irritated. When Poole steps out of the space pod to reinstall the unit, HAL works one of the pod's mechanical arms—a runaway extension of the human arm—to snip off his oxygen line. Poole's partner, Mission Commander David Bowman, goes after the body in another space pod and returns to the ship. But HAL won't obey the command to open the port. The only way into the ship now is through the emergency air lock, providing the entrant is fully suited. Bowman, in his haste to rescue Poole, forgot to bring his helmet into the pod.

Meanwhile, HAL has turned off the life-support systems for the three men in hibernation. The blinking lights which register their deaths say, LIFE

PROCESSES TERMINATED, a fitting obituary for technomorphic man.

But at bottom, Bowman is a real hero. He triumphs over the technomorphism that turns men into dull machines. He manipulates the pod's waldo arm to open the airlock on the ship, then aligns the pod's hatch with it. Bowman calculates that if he blows the hatch bolts, the air exploding outward from the pod will blast him into the evacuated airlock; perhaps he can survive half a minute in hard, cold vacuum. In a realistic sequence of human daring and bravery, Bowman is exploded into the ship with a silent frenzy that does not pick up sound until the lock is closed and air pressure is restored.

Bowman's next move is to lobotomize HAL, who pleads sorry for the four murders in a parody of a guilty human trying to get off the hook: "I admit I've made some pretty bad decisions lately." The humor of this line conceals an affirmation of Hal's autonomy. Removal of his higher control centers is a significant act forecasting things to come. It looks forward to the time when man shall be able to cut himself loose from his extensions altogether. The solution to a runaway technology is not mastery over it but abandonment of it. The liabilities of human dependence on material means are to be left behind in the conquest of some higher form of existence.

The monolith appears outside the cabin windows at this juncture to indicate the direction of that conquest. Bowman follows it in his space pod, but the monolith vanishes in a purple glow. Straining his eyes on the spot he suddenly is led down a rushing cor-

ridor of computer-generated motion effects that represent his translation through a fourth dimensional experience.

During this sensational ride, Bowman is given a god-like vision of whole galaxies in full form, turning wheels of hot gasses and their embedded star clusters. Through this cosmic whirlpool shoots a symbolic representation of the parent ship: a fiery, sperm-shaped comet thing that drives across the screen and into a pulsing, luminous gas cloud. A delicate point of theology is raised here. In that famous novel of theological science-fiction, PERELANDRA (1944), C.S. Lewis argues that man is evil; space travel will only spread the blight. He is out to rebut the idea that

Humanity, having now sufficiently corrupted the planet where it arose, must at all costs contrive to seed itself over a larger area: that the vast astronomical distances which are God's quarantine regulations, must somehow be overcome.

The viewpoint of 2001, however, is that man's seeding of the cosmos is a positive good. For the men who will go out to quicken the universe with the human presence will be supermen, lifted beyond the evil they did on Earth as captives of their technology. Man's extensions always carried a built in margin of wickedness, beginning with the apeman's weapon of the hunt that could be used also as a weapon of war. But the supermen will be fully emancipated from material extensions as from the material body that is extended by technology. The universe will be made full with the

AMAZING STORIES

essential goodness of a disembodied humanity.

The transition for Bowman takes place in a hotel suite, mocked up beyond Jupiter by the kind of super beings he and the rest of mankind are destined to join. There Bowman ages rapidly and takes to bed, living out the childhood of man to the end. When the end comes, the great monolith stands before his bed, that recurrent symbol of the great yearning that prompted the apemen millions of years ago to reach for tool making and that now prompts Bowman to reach out for something beyond artifice. He struggles upward from his sheets, unrecognizable in his stupendous oldness, yet reaching painfully for that ineluctable goal waiting beyond the mysterious form standing before him. He reaches forward to touch it, reaching for rebirth . . .

Cut to a view of planet Earth as seen from outer space. The camera moves aside from the great green disc in the sky to include another luminous body nearby. It is an enormous, transparent globe that contains an alert, watchful embryo of cosmic proportions, looking down on Earth with the eyes of Bowman, as he prepares to liberate all humanity from the disabilities of material existence and promote it to the status he has attained to. This giant embryonic figure is a symbolic show, for the sake of something to visualize on the screen, of Bowman's leadership in attaining to a state of pure, incorporeal intellect.

Such a destiny is predicted not alone by science fiction writers. It is to be found also in *THE PHENOMENON OF MAN* (1959) by the late Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *APEMAN, SUPERMAN*

the Catholic father and anthropologist, who explains that the gathering force of mind that has come to envelope the surface of the planet Earth out of prehuman beginnings must eventuate in a projection into space as a purely spiritual component that will converge ultimately at the Omega point in one single intellectual entity, the very stuff of God. But once all the consciousness of the universe has accumulated and merged in the Omega point, God will get lonely in his completeness, and the process of creation must begin again by way of arousing conscious creatures to reach out once more for closure in one collective identity.

2001 comes to an end on a great trumpeting blast of the World Riddle theme, C-G-C, the shimmering globe of Bowman's pure mind stuff staring the audience in the face. Soon the whole population of Earth will join him. But the story of man is not complete with the evolution from apeman to superman. When the curtain closes, the superman is still one step away from evolving into God.

But even then the story is not finished. For the universe is cyclical. God will come down from the hills again. Thus spake Zarathustra:

Lo! I am weary of my wisdom.
I need hands reaching out for it.
For that end I must descend to the depth, as thou dost at even,
when sinking behind the sea
thou givest light to the lower regions,
thou resplendent star!
Zarathustra will once more become a man.

Now that the theologians tells us that God is dead, it appears that the burden of theology is upon SF.

The End



THE FUTURE IN BOOKS

Conducted by WILLIAM ATHELING, Jr.

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THE DEMON BREED by James H. Schmitz. Ace Books H-105, New York, 1968. 157 pages, paper, 60c

Here under the author's own title is the book version of the novel serialized last year by *Analog* as "The Tuvela." The author's title is much the better, because it contains, as a paradox, the point of the book.

The demons, ostensibly, are a race of creatures called Parahuans, who are mounting a test attack on a human colony world called Nandy-Cline, to see if they can get away with an all-out conquest of the human federation. At the crucial phase of the test attack, they are known to and opposed by only two humans and one mutated sea-otter; and one of the humans is a captive. The other has been maneuvered by the captive into posing as a member of a non-existent group of supermen (the Guardians, or Tuvela). This protagonist, using

nothing but raw courage, completely logical strategy and tactics, and a minimum of gadgets, succeeds in routing the Parahuans from Nandy-Cline, with later results that cause the abandonment of the entire plan of conquest.

Thus the novel's title poses the question: Who really are the demons? The Parahuans are physically powerful, resourceful, technically advanced, and fearfully cruel—and wind up cut to ribbons. Schmitz here is making the point so dear to the hearts of both Heinlein and Campbell, and to some extent van Vogt and Eric Frank Russell, before him: that human beings are the toughest, most vicious race anyone is ever likely to encounter. And he makes it stick, too.

As in a number of recent Schmitz books, the protagonist is a girl, and very well realized. Most of the action takes place on or under a floating marine island, slightly reminiscent of those in C. S. Lewis' *Peregrandra* but much better rationalized.

The otters are charming, and they show furthermore a strength of Schmitz he shares with few other authors: when he invents an odd animal, he sees immediately that its very existence implies certain sets of relationships with other animals and plants, and so he builds up for the reader a whole imaginary ecology. Although the ending is visible by the end of the first chapter, the mechanics of the theoretically uneven battle are so fascinating that there is plenty of suspense nonetheless. And I hope nobody needs to be told at this late date that Schmitz's style is a joy—precise, flexible, colorful, and frequently witty. —WAJr

THE MAKING OF STAR TREK, by Stephen E. Whitfield (with Gene Roddenberry). Ballantine Books 73004, New York, 1968. 413 pp., paper, 95c

As the author adapter of the three (coming up four) "Star Trek" books, I often am sent amateur story suggestions, plot outlines, treatments, short stories, and offers of complete scripts. I return these unread, and as this present book makes clear, so does the studio. The moral is clear: If you don't submit through a recognized agent, you're wasting your time trying to write for "Star Trek."

This matter aside, this book should be a gold mine for anyone who still wants to write for the show, or who is simply interested in the vastly complicated business of how the show originated and is put out. It contains many diagrams and photos, portions of scripts, chapters about the main characters, casts of all the shows through March 1968, and much more.

One slightly annoying feature is that every direct quotation from Gene Roddenberry IS RUN ENTIRELY IN CAPITAL LETTERS, as if it were the voice of God. But there seems to be no detail about "Star Trek" that cannot be found somewhere in this book, which is well organized, too.

—James Blish

PICNIC ON PARADISE by Joanna Russ. Ace Books H-72, New York, 1968. 157 pp., paper, 60c

Here is an Ace special that is specialized indeed, and may induce some rather white lips among those bores in our field who are constantly prating about "story-telling" as if they knew what it meant. I may be wrong in this prediction, and I hope I am, for Russ' novel is in fact—among other things—cast as one of the simplest and oldest of all story forms, the Long Trek, without even a subplot to complicate it. The possible hitch lies in that escape clause, "among other things." Some of those other things are:

(1) Every character in this book is a completely realized human being, even including a nameless lieutenant who vanishes permanently on page 21;

(2) Part of the story is a love story which is not a conventional story-telling gesture, but is every bit as painful as real, important love affairs invariably are, and ends just as badly as they usually do;

(3) The villain is neither a fascinatingly evil machine like Blackie Duquesne nor a moral monster like Schmitz's demons, but a pitiable man who cannot help being what he is,

and—even more pitifully—knows it;

(4) The language of the book is personal, idiosyncratic and uncompromising, very close to poetry about three quarters of the time, and outright poetry for the other quarter.

Not a single one of these aspects should get in any literate reader's way, and in fact the points I have listed really only describe what we have a right to expect in any good novel; but they are not ordinary in science fiction and I have the horrible feeling that they will raise cries of "mannerism" and "New Wave" and other such nonsense from several respectable quarters. Nonsense is what they will be; this is, simply, a fine novel which happens also to be science fiction, with a considerably greater range of emotion and observation than even the classics in our field customarily offer.

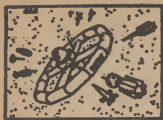
There are some smaller difficulties which are also, to my eyes, perfectly right. At the opening, the heroine finds herself in a situation which completely confuses her, and since the story is told throughout from her point of view, the reader is also confused. This is realistic and I have no quarrel with it (it is, in fact, an example of what I mean by "uncompromising"). Furthermore it is not mechanical realism, but is doing other work; Russ uses it to show how rapidly, and by what methods, her heroine grasps a confusing situation.

It would be impossible to tell you anything about the plot without spoiling the book for you—it is that

simple—but it is genuine science fiction, rich with small suggestive touches which tell you things about the future which set your own imagination to work. The heroine, Alyx, has appeared in previous stories by this writer, and her background as exposed here is somewhat inconsistent with that suggested in the earlier tales. About this, the authoress told me last Sunday, "The hell with it;" and so say I. The material in this book is beautifully consistent and faithful to itself, which is more than enough.

By the usual standards this is also a rather short novel, which Ace has stretched to 157 pages by heavily leading the type. However, the texture of the prose is sufficiently dense as to impose a slower-than-usual rate of reading—or it should, if it's to be fairly appreciated—so you won't feel cheated. The book carries with it endorsements by Fritz Leiber, Theodore Sturgeon, Paul Anderson and Samuel R. Delany, to which I am honored to add my own. It is not a masterpiece or even a "classic"—for one thing, it is too short to bear that much weight—but if Joanna Russ does not eventually produce a book which can be so labelled, I shall be very much surprised. On this showing, she is the only new science fiction writer capable of doing the kind of work Sturgeon does at his best. Now that I mull it over, that is the most frightening thought I have had since I first read *Rogue Moon*.
—WAJR

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Continued from page 29

that, just the usual infants in the chrome-steel garbage pits, squirming among the broken chairs and the stewed corn and the other refuse, because their Seniors had decided that really! here in the years of the pleasure peak, with all the nice gadgets to be enjoyed, no one could expect them to break into the time of joy days to go raising kids. And as luck would have it, we beat G-4. They had got a tooth jammed in something especially heavy, someone said it was a double sack of twins, and had been held up I guess nearly as long as we had been talking to the little miss. I had always thought we had the fastest team and the better garbage rate, and I guess that about proved it. Because we got to count the infant heads that day, as we had for five Saturdays, straight running, or ever since I had captained the crew, and it went on our record, and soon we would be up for an Achievement Up, which, after all, was what we were

Continued from page 136

Mr. Ustinov's, as far as judgment is possible. Names have been changed, and details of the story have been shifted, and it is even possible that I am here talking about the some giant coincidence, though I doubt I am.

Legally, both HOT MILLIONS and THE WILY WILBY are tales which may spring from the same real events; nobody can copyright a series of real events; Mr. McKelway is legally entitled neither to credit

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all out for. And we counted five hundred and eighty little heads that day, and the big one with the deep deep brown eyes still visible through the garbage glaze made five hundred and eighty-one. And I think we were all a little tired from all that rushing.

"You know what?" I said to Slot and Totter, when we were all up in the cab and riding back to the headquarters of our particular garbage precinct, "this job takes a lot out of a man, out here in all kinds of weather, all this rushing and being timed and all. Let's just hustle the union out now for another general raise and not wait for our Achievement Up."

So we did it, and though we're only making twenty-five dollars an hour now, maybe that's about what the job's worth, and I guess we're happy as trash and garbage craftsmen, keeping an eye out for the human values, while achieving to the limits of our abilities here in our smelly clothes.

The End

nor payment.

He has received no credit. I do not know whether he has received payment.

But I would rather like to know. And I begin to think that contributing to the profits of what is surely a completely legal enterprise, when it appears to be as clearly immoral, may be too high a price to pay even for the satisfactions of Miss Smith.

It is, I think, a final tribute to her that I am, simply, not quite sure.

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377

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